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NOVEL Santaroga Barrier

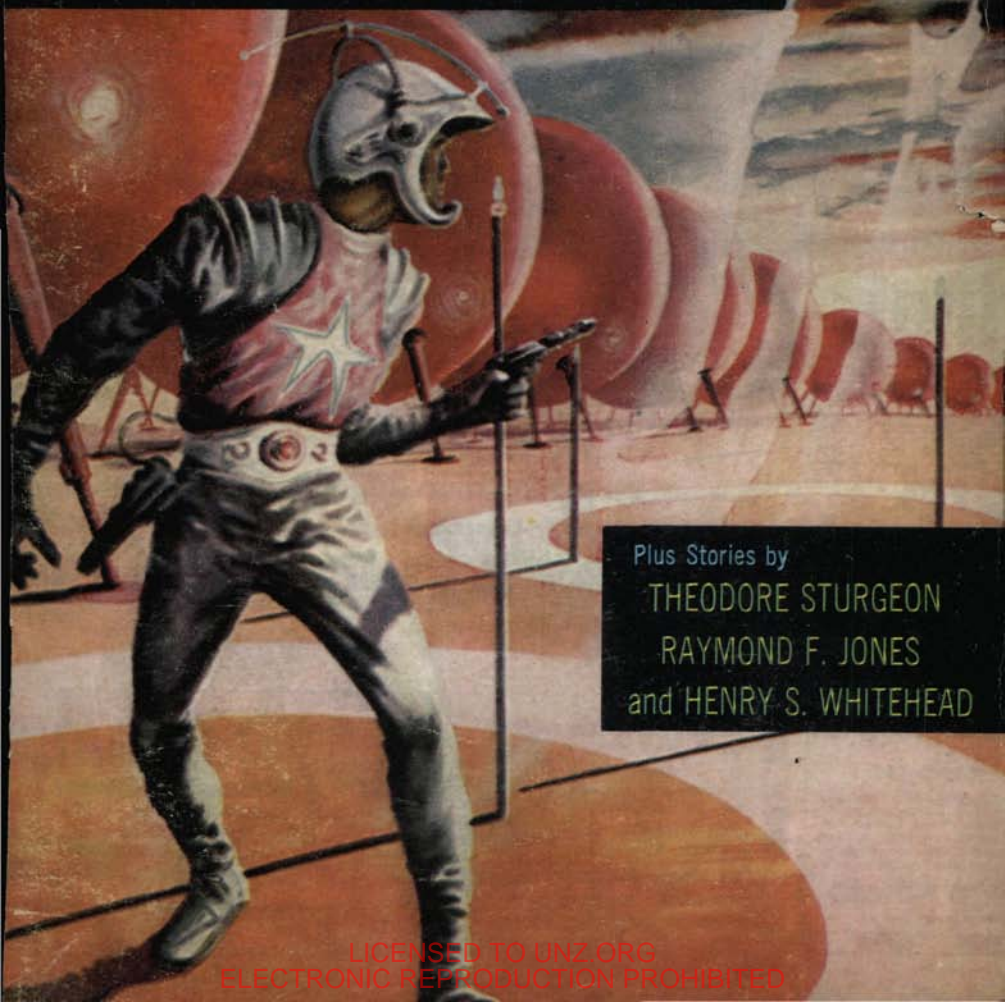
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THE FUTURE IN BOOKS

by Harry Harrison



Well, what about Burroughs? Edgar Rice, that is. My offhand guess is that William is as unknown to the average SF reader as is naturalist John. There is only one Burroughs in our firmament, and if you don't know who he is — slip this copy of **AMAZING** back onto the rack and grab the **RANCH ROMANCES** that you were really reaching for.

Personally, just to clear the decks before the battle begins, I can't abide Burroughs. Now. That *now* is the operative word. I could never stomach Tarzan at all, even in lisping youth, though one good friend of mine, an SF illustrator of note, still rereads all the Tarzan books, one after another, year after year. Burroughs to me means **A PRINCESS OF MARS**, and any man who could write that book cannot be all bad. I was seven when I first read it, it took me up by the neck and shook me, drew me

bodily into SF and I have never been the same since. I can still recall the powerful impact of this book upon my jelling brain cells and, with this experience in mind, cannot offhandedly reject any products of its author.

THE BIG SWINGERS by Robert W. Fenton (Prentice-Hall, \$6.95) is a strangely mixed biography of Tarzan and his creator. At times it is difficult to tell if it is Edgar's or the second Lord Greystoke's that we are reading, and I presume that this is the author's intention. Quotes from Tarzan books, in italics, are dropped into the body of the copy to point up parallels in the author's life. A fine idea, and it works quite well, though there are times when the quotes equal, or exceed, the biographer's copy so that it is not quite clear who is being discussed. All right, I suppose, since Mr. Fenton's aim appears to be a stressing of the marked similari-

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ties between the life and thoughts of the author and his fictional creation. Mr. Fenton is the right man for this job since his prose resembles, to a great pulpish degree, that of his subject.

A summation? Difficult. If you are a Burroughs fan every page contains a laugh and a tear, you'll love the photos of the various cinematic Tarzans, and can spend long evenings memorizing the spurious Ape-English Dictionary.

For the others; this is certainly an interesting biography of a literary phenomena the likes of which the world has rarely seen.

If science fiction has poles, surely John W. Campbell must be the full 180 degrees away from Burroughs. He has edited *ANALOG 5* (Doubleday, \$4.95), the latest in the series, the fifth annual year's best from the pages of the magazine. John Campbell is as hard a man to argue with in print as well as in person. I would not have chosen these stories as being best of the year, but he has and they make related sense on his terms. Perhaps the only generalized grumble that I can register is that he finds the idea more important than the way it is told and, in science fiction, this is not an unusual attitude. Skipping through the book, and making no attempt to list all the stories, I find *COMPUTERS DON'T ARGUE*, a near-classic by Gordon R. Dickson, about the

man condemned to death by the book club computer. And *MIS- SION "RED CLASH"* by Joe Poyer, an *Engineer's Delight* story that could have appeared in no other magazine. Full of unrealistic incidents and cardboard people made workable by all that technological know-how. And James H. Schmitz's *BALANCED ECOLOGY*, which is a most obvious yet zippy yarn about a lovely ecology and how its gears mesh. And there is . . . no, there are more stories like this and they should all be read. Highly recommended.

Ballantine Books seem to be trying to build a new myth around the old Tarzan formula, and when you have said that about *DOL- PHIN BOY* by Roy Meyers (Ballantine, 75¢) you have almost said it all. The noble parents, the deserted babe, the animal surrogate-mother, the life and conversations with the animals, etc., follow on almost a one-to-one basis. Yet, strangely enough, it works. Meyers tells the tale well, and if this book is not for the sophisticated, it is certainly for the peers of our second reader, Todd, now 12, who says; "It's a great book. I read it two and a half times."

I like Arthur Sellings. Not only is he a cheery drinking companion, but he writes those lovely soft-sell, come-along-with-me type books that only native

Continued on page 103

Santaroga Barrier

Frank Herbert

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

Ever since Dune—which won both a Hugo and a Nebula Award as the Best F-F Novel of 1965—Frank Herbert seems to have given up writing quality short stories and novellas for turning out—at an incredible pace—some of the finest full-length science fiction of our time. Such as “The Heaven Makers” (which ran here recently) and now the following beautifully delineated story of psychologist Gilbert Dasein, sent to investigate a town so “normal” that two of his predecessors had to leave it—in a box!

First of Three Parts

THE sun went down as the five-year-old Ford camper-pickup truck ground over the pass and started down the long grade into Santaroga Valley. A crescent-shaped turnoff had been leveled beside the first highway curve. Gilbert Dasein pulled his truck onto the gravel, stopped at a white barrier fence and looked down into the valley whose secrets he had come to expose.

Two men already had died on this project, Dasein reminded himself. Accidents. *Natural* accidents. What was down there in that bowl of shadows inhabited by random lights? Was there an accident waiting for him?

Dasein's back ached after the long drive up from Berkeley. He shut off the motor, stretched. A burning odor of hot oil per-

meated the cab. The union of truckbed and camper emitted creakings and poppings.

The valley stretched out below him looked somehow different from what Dasein had expected. The sky around it was a ring of luminous blue full of sunset glow that spilled over into an upper belt of trees and rocks.

There was a sense of quiet about the place, of an island sheltered from storms.

What did I expect the place to be? Dasein wondered.

He decided all the maps he'd studied, all the reports on Santaroga he'd read, had led him to believe he knew the valley. But maps were not the land. Reports weren't people.

Dasein glanced at his wristwatch: almost seven. He felt reluc-

tant to continue on in the dusk.

Far off to the left across the valley, strips of green light glowed among trees. That was the area labeled "greenhouses" on the map. A castellated block of milky white on an outcropping down to his right he identified as the Jaspers Cheese Cooperative. The yellow gleam of windows and moving lights around it spoke of busy activity.

Dasein grew aware of insect sounds in the darkness around him, the swoop-humming of air through nighthawks' wings and, away in the distance, the mournful baying of hounds. The voice of the pack appeared to come from beyond the Co-op.

He swallowed, thinking that the yellow windows suddenly were like baleful eyes peering into the valley's darker depths.

Dasein shook his head, smiled. That was no way to think. Unprofessional. All the ominous nonsense muttered about Santaroga had to be put aside. A scientific investigation could not operate in that atmosphere. He turned on the cab's dome light, took his briefcase from the seat beside him. Gold lettering on the brown letter identified it: "Gilbert Dasein—Department of Psychology—University of California—Berkeley."

In a battered folder from the case he began writing: "Arrived Santaroga Valley approximately 6:45 p.m. Setting is that of a pros-

SANTAROGA BARRIER



perous farm community . . .”

Presently, he put case and folder aside.

Prosperous farm community, he thought. How could he know it was prosperous? No—property wasn’t what he saw. That was something he knew from the reports.

The real valley in front of him now conveyed a sense of waiting, of quietness punctuated by occasional tinklings of cowbells. He imagined husbands and wives down there after a day of work. What did they discuss now in their waiting darkness?

What did Jenny Sorge discuss with her husband—provided she had a husband? It seemed impossible she’d still be single—lovely, nubile Jenny. It was more than a year since they’d last seen each other at the University.

Dasein sighed. No escaping thoughts of Jenny—not here in Santaroga. Jenny contained part of Santaroga’s mystery. She was an element of the Santaroga Barrier and a prime subject for his present investigation.

Again, Dasein sighed. He wasn’t fooling himself. He knew why he’d accepted this project. It wasn’t the munificent sum those chain stores were paying the university for this study, nor the generous salary provided for himself.

He had come because this was where Jenny lived.

Dasein told himself he’d smile

and act normal, *perfectly normal*, when he met her. He was here on business, a psychologist detached from his usual teaching duties to make a market study in Santaroga Valley.

What was a perfectly normal way to act with Jenny, though? How did one achieve normalcy when encountering the paranormal?

Jenny was a Santarogan—and the normalcy of this valley defied normal explanations.

His mind went to the reports, “the known facts.” All the folders of data, the collections of official prying, the second-hand secrets which were the stock in trade of the bureaucracy—all this really added up to a single “known fact” about Santaroga: There was something extraordinary at work here, something far more disturbing than any so-called market study had ever tackled before.

Meyer Davidson, the soft looking, pink fleshed little man who’d presented himself as the agent of the investment corporation, the holding company behind the chain stores paying for this project, had put it in an angry nutshell at the first orientation meeting: “The whole thing about Santaroga boils down to this—Why were we forced to close our branches there? Why won’t even *one* Santarogan trade with an outsider? That’s what we want to know. What’s this Santaroga

Barrier which keeps us from doing business there?"

Davidson wasn't as soft as he looked.

Dasein started the truck, turned on his headlights, resumed his course down the winding grade.

All the data was a single datum.

Outsiders found no houses for rent or sale in this valley.

Santaroga officials said they had no juvenile delinquency figures for the state's statistics.

Servicemen from Santaroga always returned when they were discharged. In fact, no Santarogan had ever been known to move out of the valley.

Why? Was it a two-way barrier?

And the curious anomalies: The data had included a medical journal article by Jenny's uncle, Dr. Lawrence Piaget, reputedly the valley's leading physician. The article: "The Poison Oak Syndrome in Santaroga." Its substance: Santarogans had a remarkable susceptibility to allergens when forced to live away from the valley for extended periods. This was the chief reason for service rejection of Santaroga's youths.

Data equalled datum.

Santaroga reported no cases of mental illness or mental deficiency to the State Department of Mental Hygiene. No Santarogan could be found in a state mental hospital. (The psychiatrist who

headed Dasein's university department, Dr. Chami Selador, found this fact "alarming.")

Cigaret sales in Santaroga could be accounted for by transient purchasers.

Santarogans manifested an iron resistance to national advertising. (An un-American symptom, according to Meyer Davidson.)

No cheese, wines or beers made outside the valley could be marketed to Santarogans.

All the valley's businesses, including the bank, were locally owned. They flatly rejected outside investment money.

Santaroga had successfully resisted every "pork barrel" government project the politicians had offered. Their State Senator was from Porterville, ten miles behind Dasein and well outside the valley. Among the political figures Dasein had interviewed to lay the groundwork for his study, the State Senator was one of the few who didn't think Santarogans were "a pack of kooks, maybe religious nuts of some kind."

"Look, Dr. Dasein," he'd said, "all this mystery crap about Santaroga is just that—crap."

The Senator was a skinny, intense man with a shock of gray hair and red-veined eyes. Bartsow was his name; one of the old California families.

Bartsow's opinion: "Santaroga's a last outpost of American individualism. They're Yankees, Down easters living in Califor-

nia. Nothing mysterious about 'em at all. They don't ask special favors and they don't fan my ears with stupid questions. I wish all my constituents were as straightforward and honest."

One man's opinion, Dasein thought.

An isolated opinion.

Dasein was down into the valley proper now. The two-lane road leveled into a passage through gigantic trees. This was the Avenue of the Giants winding between rows of *sequoia gigantea*.

There were homes set back in the trees. The datum-data said some of these homes had been here since the gold rush. The scroll work of carpenter gothic lined their eaves. Many were three stories high, yellow lights in their windows.

Dasein grew aware of an absence, a negative fact about the houses he saw. No television flicker, no cathode living rooms, no walls washed to skimmed-milk gray by the omniscient tube.

The road forked ahead of him. An arrow pointed left to "City Center," and two arrows directed him to the right to "The Santaroga House" and "Jaspers Cheese Co-op."

Dasein turned right.

His road wound upward beneath an arch: "Santaroga, The Town That Cheese Built." Presently, it emerged from the redwoods into an oak flat. The Co-

op loomed grey white, bustling with lights and activity behind a chain fence on his right. Across the road to his left stood Dasein's first goal here, a long three-story inn built in the rambling 1900 style with a porch its full length. Lines of multi-paned windows (mostly dark) looked down into a gravel parking area. The sign at the entrance read: "Santaroga House—Gold Rush Museum—Hours 9 a.m. to 5 p.m."

Most of the cars nosed to a stone border parallel to the porch were well kept older models. A few shiny new machines were parked in a second row as though standing aloof.

Dasein parked beside a 1939 Chevrolet whose paint gleamed with a rich waxy gloss. Red-brown upholstery visible through the windows appeared to be hand-tailored leather.

Rich man's toy, Dasein thought.

He took his suitcase from the camper, turned to the inn. There was a smell of new-mown lawn in the air and the sound of running water. It reminded Dasein of his childhood, his aunt's garden with the brook along the back. A strong sense of nostalgia gripped him.

Abruptly, a discordant note intruded. From the upper floors of the inn came the raucous sound of a man and woman arguing, the man's voice brusque, the woman's with a strident fishwife quality.

"I'm not staying in this godforsaken hole one more night," the woman screamed. "They don't want our money! They don't want us! You do what you want; I'm leaving!"

"Belle, stop it! You've . . ."

A window slammed. The argument dimmed to a muted screeching-mumbling.

Dasein took a deep breath. The argument restored his perspective. Here were two more people with their noses against the Santaroga Barrier.

Dasein strode along the gravel, up four steps to the porch and through swinging doors with windows frosted by scroll etching. He found himself in a high ceilinged lobby, crystal chandeliers overhead. Dark wood paneling, heavily grained like ancient charts enclosed the space. A curved counter stretched across the corner to his right, an open door behind it from which came the sound of a switchboard. To the right of this counter was a wide opening through which he glimpsed a dining room—white tablecloths, crystal, silver. A western stagecoach was parked at his left behind brass posts supporting a maroon velvet rope with a "Do Not Touch" sign.

Dasein stopped to study the coach. It smelled of dust and mildew. A framed card on the boot gave its history: "Used on the San Francisco-Santaroga route from 1868 to 1871." Below this card was

a slightly larger frame enclosing a yellowed sheet of paper with a brass legend beside it: "A note from Black Bart, the Po-8 Highwayman." In sprawling script on the yellow paper it read:

*"So here I've stood while
wind and rain
Have set the trees a-sobbin'
And risked my life for that
damned stage
That wasn't worth the rob-
bin'."*

Dasein chuckled, shifted his briefcase to his left arm, crossed to the counter and rang the call bell.

A bald, wrinkled stick of a man in a black suit appeared in the open doorway, stared at Dasein like a hawk ready to pounce. "Yes?"

"I'd like a room," Dasein said.

"What's your business?"

Dasein stiffened at the abrupt challenge. "I'm tired," he said. "I want a night's sleep."

"Passing through, I hope," the man grumbled. He shuffled to the counter, pushed a black registry ledger toward Dasein.

Dasein took a pen from its holder beside the ledger, signed.

The clerk produced a brass key on a brass tag, said: "You get two fifty-one next to that dang' couple from L.A. Don't blame me if they keep y' awake arguing." He slapped the key onto the counter. "That'll be ten dollars . . . in advance."

"I'm hungry," Dasein said, pro-

ducing his wallet and paying. "Is the dining room open?" He accepted a receipt.

"Closes at nine," the clerk said.

"Is there a bellboy?"

"You look strong enough to carry your own bag." He pointed beyond Dasein. "Room's up them stairs, second floor."

Dasein turned. There was an open area behind the stagecoach. Scattered through it were leather chairs, high wings and heavy arms, a few occupied by elderly men sitting, reading. Light came from heavy brass floor lamps with fringed shades. A carpeted stairway led upward beyond the chairs.

It was a scene Dasein was to think of many times later as his first clue to the real nature of Santaroga. The effect was that of holding time securely in a by-gone age.

Vaguely troubled, Dasein said, "I'll check my room later. May I leave my bag here while I eat?"

"Leave it on the counter. No one'll bother it."

Dasein put the case on the counter, caught the clerk studying him with a fixed stare.

"Something wrong?" Dasein asked.

"Nope."

The clerk reached for the briefcase under Dasein's arm, but Dasein stepped back, removed it from the questing fingers, met an angry stare.

"Hmmmph!" the clerk snorted. There was no mistaking his frustration. He'd wanted a look inside the briefcase.

Inanely, Dasein said: "I . . . uh, want to look over some papers while I'm eating." And he thought: *Why do I need to explain?*

Feeling angry with himself, he turned, strode through the passage into the dining room. He found himself in a large square room, a single massive chandelier in the center, brass carriage lamps spaced around walls of dark wood paneling. The chairs at the round tables were heavy with substantial arms. A long teak bar stretched along the wall at his left, a wood-framed mirror behind it. Light glittered hypnotically from the central chandelier and glasses stacked beneath the mirror.

The room swallowed sounds. Dasein felt he had walked into a sudden hush with people turning to look at him. Actually, his entrance went almost unnoticed.

A white-coated bartender on duty for a scattering of customers at the bar glanced at him, went back to talking to a swarthy man hunched over a mug of beer.

Family groups occupied about a dozen of the tables. There was a card game at a table near the bar. Two tables held lone women busy with their forks.

There was a division of people in this room, Dasein felt. It was

a matter of nervous tension contrasted with a calmness as substantial as the room itself. He decided he could pick out the transients—they appeared tired, more rumpled; their children were closer to rebellion.

As he moved farther into the room, Dasein glimpsed himself in the bar mirror—fatigue lines on his slender face, the curly black hair mussed by the wind, brown eyes glazed with attention, still driving the car. A smudge of road dirt drew a dark line beside the cleft in his chin. Dasein rubbed at the smudge, thought: *Here's another transient.*

"You wish a table, sir?"

A Negro waiter had appeared at his elbow—white jacket, hawk nose, sharp Moorish features, a touch of gray at the temples. There was a look of command about him all out of agreement with the menial costume. Dasein thought immediately of Othello. The eyes were brown and wise.

"Yes, please: for one," Dasein said.

"This way, sir."

Dasein was guided to a table against the near wall. One of the carriage lamps bathed it in a warm yellow glow. As the heavy chair enveloped him, Dasein's attention went to the table near the bar—the card game . . . four men. He recognized one of the men from a picture Jenny had carried: Piaget, the doctor uncle, author of the medical journal article

on allergens. Piaget was a large gray-haired man, bland round face, a curious suggestion of the Oriental about him that was heightened by the fan of cards held close to his chest.

"You wish a menu, sir?"

"Yes. Just a moment . . . the men playing cards with Dr. Piaget over there."

"Sir?"

"Who are they?"

"You know Dr. Larry, sir?"

"I know his niece, Jenny Sorge. She carried a photo of Dr. Piaget."

The waiter glanced at the briefcase Dasein had placed in the center of the table. "Dasein," he said. A wide smile put a flash of white in the dark face. "You're Jenny's friend from the school."

The waiter's words carried so many implications that Dasein found himself staring, open-mouthed.

"Jenny's spoken of you, sir," the waiter said.

"Oh."

"The men playing cards with Dr. Larry—you want to know who they are." He turned to the players. "Well, sir, that's Captain Al Marden of the Highway Patrol across from Dr. Larry. On the right there, that's George Nis. He manages the Jaspers Cheese Co-op. The fellow on the left is Mr. Sam Scheler. Mr. Sam runs our independent service station. I'll get you that menu, sir."

The waiter headed to the bar.

Dasein's attention remained on the card players, wondering why they held his interest so firmly. Marden, sitting with his back partly turned toward Dasein, was in mufti, a dark blue suit. His hair was a startling mop of red. He turned his head to the right and Dasein glimpsed a narrow face, tight-lipped mouth with a cynical downtwist.

Scheler of the independent service station (Dasein wondered about this designation suddenly) was dark skinned, an angular Indian face with flat nose, heavy lips. Nis, across from him, was balding, sandy-haired, blue eyes with heavy lids, a wide mouth and deeply cleft chin.

"Your menu, sir."

The waiter placed a large red-covered folder in front of Dasein.

"Dr. Piaget and his friends appear to be enjoying their game," Dasein said.

"That game's an institution, sir. Every week about this hour, regular as sunset—dinner here and that game."

"What do they play?"

"It varies, sir. Sometimes it's bridge, sometimes pinochle. They play whist on occasion and even poker."

"What did you mean—*independent* service station?" Dasein asked. He looked up at the dark Moorish face.

"Well, sir, we here in the valley don't mess around with those

companies fixin' their prices. Mr. Sam, he buys from whoever gives him the best offer. We pay about four cents less a gallon here."

Dasein made a mental note to investigate this aspect of the Santaroga Barrier. It was in character, not buying from the big companies, but where did they get their oil products?

"The roast beef is very good, sir," the waiter said.

"You recommend it, eh?"

"I do that, sir. Grain fattened right here in the valley. We have fresh corn on the cob, potatoes Jaspers—that's with cheese sauce, very good, and we have hot house strawberries for dessert."

"Salad?" Dasein asked.

"Our salad greens aren't very good this week, sir. I'll bring you the soup. It's borscht with sour cream. And you'd like beer with that. I'll see if I can't get you some of our local product."

"With you around I don't need a menu," Dasein said. He returned the red covered folder. "Bring it on before I start eating the tablecloth."

"Yes, sir!"

Dasein watched the retreating back—white coated, wide, confident. Othello, indeed.

The waiter returned presently with a steaming bowl of soup, a white island of sour cream floating in it, and a darkly amber mug of beer.

"I note you're the only Negro

waiter here," Dasein said. "Isn't that kind of type casting?"

"You asking if I'm their *show* Negro, sir?" The waiter's voice was suddenly wary.

"I was wondering if Santaroga had any integration problems."

"Must be thirty, forty colored families in the valley, sir. We don't rightly emphasize the distinction of skin color here." The voice was hard, curt.

"I didn't mean to offend you," Dasein said.

"You didn't offend me." A smile touched the corners of his mouth, was gone. "I must admit a Negro waiter is a kind of institutional accent. Place like this . . ." He glanced around the solid, paneled room. ". . . must've had plenty of Negro waiters here in its day. Kind of like local color having me on the job." Again that flashing smile. "It's a good job, Dr. Dasein, and my kids are doing even better. Two of 'em work in the Co-op; other's going to be a lawyer."

"You have three children?"

"Two boys and a girl. If you'll excuse me, sir; I have other tables."

"Yes, of course."

Dasein lifted the mug of beer as the waiter left.

He held the beer a moment beneath his nose. There was a tangy odor about it with a suggestion of cellars and mushrooms. Dasein remembered suddenly that Jenny had praised the

local Santaroga beer. He sipped it—soft on the tongue, smooth clean aftertaste of malt. It was everything Jenny had said.

Jenny, he thought. *Jenny . . . Jenny . . .*

Why had she never invited him to Santaroga on her regular weekend trips home? She'd never missed a weekend, he recalled. Their dates had always been in mid-week. He remembered what she'd told him about herself: orphaned, raised by the uncle, Piaget, and a maiden aunt . . . Sarah.

Dasein took another drink of the beer, sampled the soup. They did go well together. The sour cream had a flavor reminiscent of the beer, a strange new tang.

There'd never been any mistaking Jenny's affection for him, Dasein thought. They'd had a *thing*, chemical, exciting. But no *direct* invitation to meet her family, see the valley. A hesitant probing, yes—what would he think of setting up practice in Santaroga? Sometime he must talk to Uncle Larry about some interesting cases.

What cases? Dasein wondered, remembering. The Santaroga information folders Dr. Selador had supplied were definite: "No reported cases of mental illness."

Jenny . . . Jenny . . .

Dasein's mind went back to the night he'd proposed. No hesitant probing on Jenny's part then

—Could he live in Santaroga?

He could remember his own incredulous demand: "Why do we have to live in Santaroga?"

"Because I can't live anywhere else." That was what she'd said. "Because I can't live anywhere else."

Love me, love my valley.

No amount of pleading could wring an explanation from her. She'd made that plain. In the end, he'd reacted with anger boiling out of injured manhood. Did she think he couldn't support her any place but in Santaroga?

"Come and see Santaroga," she'd begged.

"Not unless you'll consider living outside."

Impasse.

Remembering the fight, Dasein felt his cheeks go warm. It'd been final week. She'd refused to answer his telephone calls for two days . . . and he'd refused to call after that. He'd retreated into a hurt shell.

And Jenny had gone back to her precious valley. When he'd written, swallowed his pride, offered to come and see her—no answer. Her valley had swallowed her.

This valley.

Dasein sighed, looked around the dining room, remembering Jenny's intensity when she spoke about Santaroga. This paneled dining room, the Santarogans he could see, didn't fit the picture in his mind.

Why didn't she answer my let-

ters? he asked himself. Most likely she's married. That must be it.

Dasein saw his waiter come around the end of the bar with a tray. The bartender signaled: "Win." The waiter stopped, rested the tray on the bar. Their heads moved close together beside the tray. Dasein received the impression they were arguing. Presently, the waiter said something with a chopping motion of the head, grabbed up the tray, brought it to Dasein's table.

"Doggone busybody," he said as he put the tray down across from Dasein, began distributing the dishes from it. "Try to tell me I can't give you Jaspers! Good friend of Jenny's and I can't give him Jaspers."

The waiter's anger cooled; he shook his head, smiled, put a plate mounded with food before Dasein.

"Too doggone many busybodies in this world, y' ask me."

"The bartender," Dasein said. "I heard him call you 'Win'."

"Winston Burdeaux, sir, at your service." He moved around the table closer to Dasein. "Wouldn't give me any Jaspers beer for you this time, sir." He took a frosted bottle from the tray and put it near the mug of beer he'd served earlier. "This isn't as good as what I brought before. The food's real Jaspers, though. Doggone busybody couldn't stop me from doing that."

"Jaspers," Dasein said. "I thought it was just the cheese."

Burdeaux pursed his lips, looked thoughtful. "Oh, no, sir. Jaspers, that's in all the products from the Co-op. Didn't Jenny ever tell you?" He frowned. "Haven't you ever been up here in the valley with her, sir?"

"No." Dasein shook his head from side to side.

"You *are* Dr. Dasein—Gilbert Dasein?"

"Yes."

"You're the fellow Jenny's sweet on, then." He grinned, said: "Eat up, sir. It's *good* food."

Before Dasein could collect his thoughts, Burdeaux turned, hurried away.

"*You're the fellow Jenny's sweet on,*" Dasein thought. Present tense . . . not past tense. He felt his heart hammering, cursed himself for an idiot. It was just Burdeaux's way of talking. That was all it could be.

Confused, he bent to his food.

The roast beef in his first bite lived up to Burdeaux's prediction — tender, juicy. The cheese sauce on the potatoes had a flowing tang—reminiscent of the beer and the sour cream.

The fellow Jenny's sweet on.

Burdeaux's words gripped Dasein's mind as he ate, filled him with turmoil.

Dasein looked up from his food, seeking Burdeaux. The waiter was nowhere in sight. *Jaspers*. It was this rich tang, this new fla-

vor. His attention went to the bottle of beer, the non-Jaspers beer. *Not as good?* He sampled it directly from the bottle, found it left a bitter metallic aftertaste. A sip of the first beer from the mug—smooth, soothing. Dasein felt it had cleared his head as it cleared his tongue of the other flavor.

He put down the mug, looked across the room, caught the bartender staring at him, scowling. The man looked away.

They were small things—two beers, an argument between a waiter and a bartender, a watchful bartender—nothing but clock ticks in a lifetime, but Dasein sensed danger in them. He reminded himself that two investigators had met fatal accidents in the Santaroga Valley—*death by misadventure* . . . a car going too fast around a corner, off the road into a ravine . . . a fall from a rocky ledge into a river—drowned. *Natural* accidents, so certified by state investigation.

Thoughtful, Dasein returned to his food.

Presently, Burdeaux brought the strawberries, hovered as Dasein sampled them.

"Good, sir?"

"Very good. Better than that bottle of beer."

"My fault, sir. Perhaps another time." He coughed discreetly. "Does Jenny know you're here?"

Dasein put down his spoon, looked into his dish of strawberries as though trying to find his

reflection there. His mind suddenly produced a memory picture of Jenny in a red dress, vital, laughing, bubbling with energy. "No . . . not yet," he said.

"You know Jenny's still a single girl, sir?"

Dasein glanced across to the card game. How leather tan the players' skin looked. *Jenny not married?* Dr. Piaget looked up from the card game, said something to the man on his left. They laughed.

"Has . . . is she in the telephone directory, Mr. Burdeaux?" Dasein asked.

"She lives with Dr. Piaget, sir. And why don't you call me Win?"

Dasein looked up at Burdeaux's sharp Moorish face, wondering suddenly about the man. There was just a hint of Souther accent in his voice. The probing friendliness, the volunteered information about Jenny—it was all faintly Southern, intimate, kindly . . . but there were undertones of something else: a questing awareness, harsh and direct. The psychologist in Dasein was fully alert now.

"Have you lived very long here in the valley, Win?" Dasein asked.

"'Bout twelve years, sir."

"How'd you come to settle here?"

Burdeaux shook his head. A rueful half smile touched his lips. "Oh, you wouldn't like to hear about that, sir."

"But I would." Dasein stared up

at Burdeaux, waiting. Somewhere there was a wedge that would open this valley's mysteries to him. *Jenny not married?* Perhaps Burdeaux was that wedge. There was an openness about his own manner, Dasein knew, that invited confidences. He relied upon this now.

"Well, if you really want to know, sir," Burdeaux said. "I was in the N'Orleans jailhouse for cuttin' up." (Dasein noted a sudden richness of the Southern accent.) "We was doin' our numbers, usin' dirty language that'd make your neck hair walk. I suddenly heard myself doin' that, sir. It made me review my thinkin' and I saw it was kid stuff. Juvenile." Burdeaux mouthed the word, proud of it. "Juvenile, sir. Well, when I got out of that jailhouse, the high sheriff tellin' me never to come back, I went me home to my woman and I tol' Annie, I tol' her we was leavin'. That's when we left to come here, sir."

"Just like that, you left?"

"We hit the road on our feet, sir. It wasn't easy, an' there was some places made us wish we'd never left. When we come here, though, we knew it was worth it."

"You just wandered until you came here?"

"It was like God was leadin' us, sir. This place, well, sir, it's hard to explain. But . . . well, they insisted I go to school to better myself. That's one thing. I can

speaking good standard English when I want . . . when I think about it." (The accent began to fade.)

Dasein smiled encouragingly. "These must be very nice people here in the valley."

"I'm going to tell you something, sir," Burdeaux said. "Maybe you can understand if I tell you about something happened to me here. It's a thing would've hurt me pretty bad one time, but here . . . We were at a Jaspers party, sir. It was right after my girl announced her engagement to Cal Nis. And George, Cal's daddy, came over and put his arm across my shoulder. 'Well there, Win, you old nigger bastard,' he said, 'we better have us a good drink and a talk together 'cause our kids are going to make us related.' That was it, Mr. Dasein. He didn't mean a thing calling me nigger. It was just like . . . like the way we call a pale blonde fellow here Whitey. It was like saying my skin's black for identification the way you might come into a room and ask for Al Marden and I'd say: 'He's that red-headed fellow over there playing cards.' As he was saying it, I knew that's all he meant. It just came over me. It was being accepted for what I am. It was the friendliest thing George could do, and that's why he did it."

Dasein scowled trying to follow the train of Burdeaux's meaning. Friendly to call him nigger?

"I don't think you understand it," Burdeaux said. "Maybe you'd have to be black to understand. But . . . well, perhaps this'll make you see it. A few minutes later, George said to me: 'Hey, Win, I wonder what kind of grandchildren we're going to have—light, dark or in between?' It was just a kind of wonderment to him, that he might have black grandchildren. He didn't care, really. He was curious. He found it interesting. You know, when I told Annie about that afterward, I cried. I was so happy I cried."

It was a long colloquy. Dasein could see realization of this fact come over Burdeaux. The man shook his head, muttered: "I talk too much. Guess I'd better . . ."

He broke off at a sudden eruption of shouting at the bar near the card players. A red-faced fat man had stepped back from the bar and was flailing it with a briefcase as he shouted at the bartender.

"You sons of bitches!" he screamed. "You think you're too goddamn' good to buy from me. My line isn't good enough for you! You can make better . . ."

The bartender grabbed the briefcase.

"Leggo of that, you son of a bitch!" the fat man yelled. "You all think you're so goddamn' good like you're some foreign country! An *outsider* am I? Let me tell you, you pack of foreigners! This is America! This is a free . . ."

The red-headed highway patrol captain, Al Marden, had risen at the first sign of trouble. Now, he put a large hand on the screamer's shoulder, shook the man once.

The screaming stopped. The angry man whirled, raised the briefcase to hit Marden. In one long, drawn-out second, the man focused on Marden's glaring eyes, the commanding face, hesitated.

"I'm Captain Marden of the Highway patrol," Marden said. "And I'm telling you we won't have any more of this." His voice was calm, stern . . . and, Dasein thought, faintly amused.

The angry man lowered the briefcase, swallowed.

"You can go out and get in your car and leave Santaroga," Marden said. "Now. And don't come back. We'll be watching for you, and we'll run you in if we ever catch you in the valley again."

Anger drained from the fat man. His shoulders slumped. He swallowed, looked around at the room of staring eyes. "I'm glad to go," he muttered. "Nothing'd make me happier. It'll be a cold day in hell when I ever come back to your dirty little valley. You stink. All of you stink." He jerked his shoulder from Marden's grasp, stalked out through the passage to the lobby.

Marden returned to the card game shaking his head.

Slowly, the room returned to its previous sounds of eating and

conversation. Dasein could feel a difference, though. The salesman's outburst had separated Santarogans and transients. An invisible wall had gone up. The transient families at their tables were hurrying their children anxious to leave.

Dasein felt the same urgency. There was a pack feeling about the room now—hunters and hunted. He smelled his own perspiration. His palms were sweaty.

This is stupid! he thought.

He reminded himself that he was a psychologist, an observer. But the observer had to observe itself.

Why am I reacting this way? he wondered.

Two of the transient families already were leaving, herding their young ahead of them, voices brittle, talking about going "on to the next town."

Why can't they stay here? he asked himself. *The rates are reasonable.*

He pictured the area in his mind: Porterville was twenty-five miles away, ten miles outside the valley on the road he had taken. The other direction led over a winding, twisting mountain road some forty miles before connecting with Highway 395. The closest communities were to the south along 395, at least seventy miles. This was an area of National Forests, lakes, fire roads, moon-scape ridges of lava rock—all of it sparsely inhabited except for the

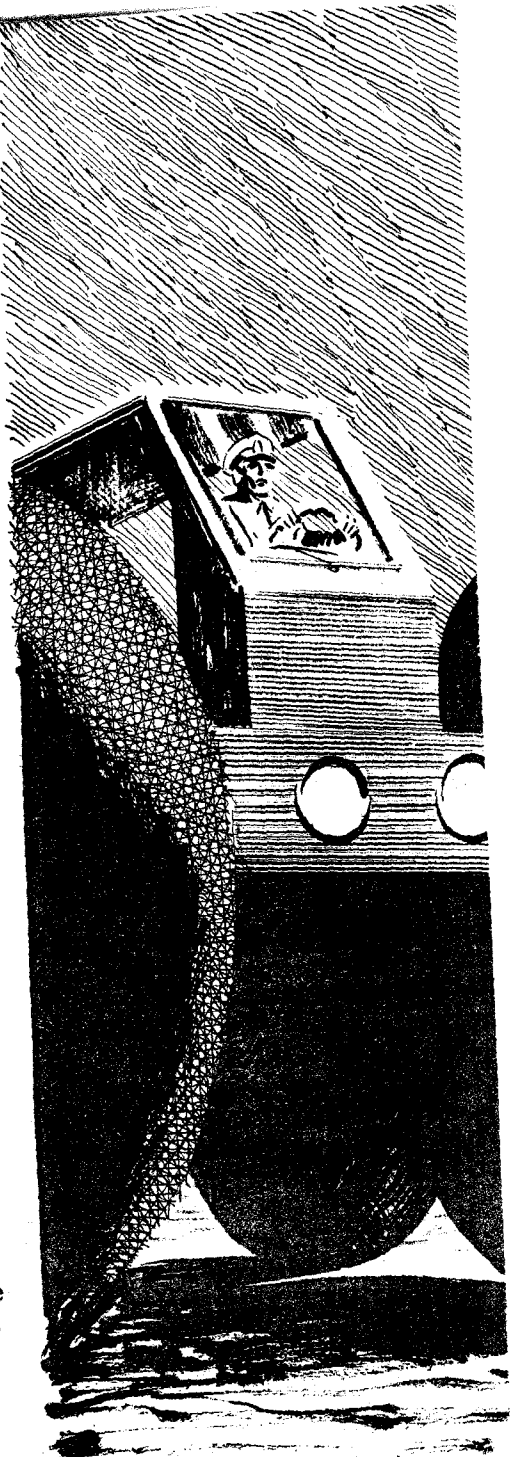
Santaroga Valley. Why should people want to travel through such an area at night rather than stay at this inn?

Dasein finished his meal, left the rest of the beer. He had to talk this place over with his department head, Dr. Chami Seldor, before making another move. Burdeaux had left the check on a discreet brown tray—three dollars and eighty-six cents. Dasein put a five dollar bill on the tray, glanced once more around the room. The surface appeared so damn' normal! The card players were intent on their game. The bartender was hunched over, chatting with two customers. A child at a table off to the right was complaining that she didn't want to drink her milk.

It wasn't normal, though, and Dasein's senses screamed this fact at him. The brittle surface of this room was prepared to shatter once more, and Dasein didn't think he would like what might be revealed. He wiped his lips on his napkin, took his briefcase and headed for the lobby.

His suitcase stood atop the desk beside the register. There was a buzzing and murmurous sound of a switchboard being operated in the room through the door at the rear corner. He took the suitcase, fingered the key in his pocket—two fifty-one. If there was no phone in the room, he decided he'd come down and place his call to Chami from a booth.

SANTAROGA BARRIER



Feeling somewhat foolish and let down after his reaction to the scene in the dining room, Dasein headed for the stairs. A few eyes looked at him over the tops of newspapers from the lobby chairs. The eyes looked alert, inquisitive.

The stairs led to a shadowy mezzanine—desks, patches of white paper. A fire door directly ahead bore the sign: "To Second Floor. Keep this door closed."

The next flight curved left, dim overhead light, wide panels of dark wood. It led through another fire door into a hall with an emergency exit sign off to the left. An illuminated board opposite the door indicated room two fifty-one down the hall to the right. Widely spaced overhead lights, the heavy pile of a maroon carpet underfoot, wide heavy doors with brass handles and holes for old fashioned passkeys gave the place an aura of the nineteenth century. Dasein half expected to see a maid in ruffled cap, apron with a bow at the back, long skirt and black stockings, sensible shoes—or a portly banker type with tight vest and high collar, an expanse of gold chain at the waist. He felt out of place, out of style here.

The brass key worked smoothly in the door of two fifty-one; it let him into a room of high ceilings, one window looking down onto the parking area. Dasein turned on the light. The switch controlled a tasseled floor lamp beside a curve-fronted dresser.

The amber light revealed a partly opened doorway into a tiled bathroom (the sound of water dripping there, a thick-legged desk-table with a single straight chair pushed against it. The bed was narrow and high with a heavily carved headboard.

Dasein pushed down on the surface of the bed. It felt soft. He dropped his suitcase onto the bed, stared at it. An edge of white fabric protruded from one end. He opened the suitcase, studied the contents. Dasein knew himself for a prissy, meticulous packer. The case now betrayed a subtle disarray. Someone had opened it and searched it. Well, it hadn't been locked. He checked the contents—nothing missing.

Why are they curious about me? he wondered.

He looked around for a telephone, found it, a standard French handset, on a shelf beside the desk. As he moved, he caught sight of himself in the mirror above the dresser—eyes wide, mouth in a straight line. Grim. He shook his head, smiled. The smile felt out of place.

Dasein sat down in the straight chair, put the phone to his ear. There was a smell of disinfectant soap in the room—and something like garlic. After a moment, he jiggled the hook.

Presently, a woman's voice came on: "This is the desk."

"I'd like to place a call to Berkeley," Dasein said. He gave the

number. There was a moment's silence, then: "Your room number, sir?"

"Two fifty-one."

"One moment, please."

He heard the sound of dialing, ringing. Another operator came on the line. Dasein listened with only half his attention as the call was placed. The smell of garlic was quite strong. He stared at the high old bed, his open suitcase. The bed appeared inviting, telling him how tired he was. His chest ached. He took a deep breath.

"Dr. Selador here."

Selador's India-cum-Oxford accent sounded familiar and intimately close. Dasein bent to the telephone, identified himself, his mind caught suddenly by that feeling of intimate nearness linked to the knowledge of the actual distance, the humming wires reaching down almost half the length of the state.

"Gilbert, old fellow, you made it all right, I see." Selador's voice was full of cheer.

"I'm at the Santaroga House, Doctor."

"I hear it's quite comfortable."

"Looks that way." Through his buzzing tiredness, Dasein felt a sense of foolishness. Why had he made this call? Selador's sharp mind would probe for underlying meanings, motives.

"I presume you didn't call just to tell me you've arrived," Selador said.

"No . . . I . . ." Dasein realized he couldn't express his own vague uneasiness, that it wouldn't make sense, that feeling of estrangement, the separation of Santarogans and Outsiders, the pricklings of warning fear. "I'd like you to look into the oil company dealings with this area," Dasein said. "See if you can find out how they do business in the valley. There's apparently an independent service station here. I want to know who supplies the gas, oil, parts—that sort of thing."

"Good point, Gilbert. I'll put one of our . . ." There was a sudden crackling, bapping sound on the line. It stopped and there was dead silence.

"Dr. Selador?"

Silence.

Damn! Dasein thought. He jiggled the hook. "Operator. Operator!"

A masculine voice came on the line. Dasein recognized the desk clerk's twang. "Who's that creating all that commotion?" the clerk demanded.

"I was cut off on my call to Berkeley," Dasein said. "Could you . . ."

"Line's out," the clerk snapped.

"Could I come down to the lobby and place the call from a pay phone?" Dasein asked. As he asked it, the thought of walking that long distance down to the lobby repelled Dasein. The feeling of tiredness was a weight on his chest.

"There's no line out of the valley right now," the clerk said. "Call can't be placed."

Dasein passed a hand across his forehead. His skin felt clammy and he wondered if he'd picked up a germ. The room around him seemed to expand and contract. His mouth was dry, and he had to swallow twice before asking: "When do they expect to have the line restored?"

"How the hell do I know?" the clerk demanded.

Dasein took the receiver away from his ear, stared at it. This was a very peculiar desk clerk... and a very peculiar room the way it wavered and slithered with its stench of garlic and its...

He grew aware of a faint hissing.

Dasein's gaze was drawn on a string of growing astonishment to an old fashioned gaslight jet that jutted from the wall beside the hall door.

Stink of garlic? Gas!

A yapping, barking voice yammered on the telephone.

Dasein looked down at the instrument in his hand. How far away it seemed. Through the window beyond the phone he could see the Innsign: *Gold Rush Museum*. Window equalled air. Dasein found muscles that obeyed, lurched across the desk, fell, smashing the telephone through the window.

The yapping voice grew fainter. Dasein felt his body stretched

across the desk. His head lay near the shattered window. He could see the telephone cord stretching out the window. There was cool air blowing on a distant forehead, a painful chill in his lungs.

They tried to kill me, he thought, full of amazement. His mind focused on the two investigators who'd already died on this project—accidents. Simple, easily explained accidents... just like this one!

The air—how cold it felt on his exposed skin. His lungs burned with it. There was a hammering pulse at his temple where it pressed against the desk surface. The pulse went on and on...

A pounding on wood joined the pulse. For a pace, they beat in an insane syncopation.

"You in there! Open up!" How commanding, that voice. *Open up*, Dasein thought. That meant getting to one's feet, crossing the room, turning a door handle...

I'm helpless, he thought. *They could still kill me*.

He heard metal rasp against metal. The air blew stronger across his face. Someone said: "Gas!"

Hands grabbed Dasein's shoulders. He was hauled back, half carried, half dragged out of the room. The face of Marden, the red-haired patrol captain, swung across his vision. He saw the clerk: pale, staring face, bald forehead glistening under yellow

light. There was a brown ceiling directly in front of Dasein. He felt a rug, hard and rasping, beneath his back.

A twanging voice said: "Who's going to pay for that window?" Someone else said: "I'll get Dr. Piaget."

Dasein's attention centered on Marden's mouth, a blurred object seen through layers of distortion. There appeared to be anger lines at the corners of the mouth. It turned toward the hovering pale face of the desk clerk, said: "To hell with your window, Johnson! I've told you enough times to get those gas jets out of this place. How many rooms still have them?"

"Don't you take that tone with me, Al Marden. I've known you since . . ."

"I'm not interested in how long you've known me, Johnson. How many rooms still have those gas jets?"

The clerk's voice came with an angry tone of hurt: "Only this'n an' four upstairs. Nobody in the other rooms."

"Get 'em out by tomorrow night," Marden said.

Hurrying footsteps interrupted the argument. Dr. Piaget's round face blotted out Dasein's view of the ceiling. The face wore a look of concern. Fingers reached down, spread Dasein's eyelids. Piaget said: "Let's get him on a bed."

"Is he going to be all right?"

the clerk asked without feeling.

"It's about time you asked," Marden said.

"We got him in time," Piaget said. "Is that room across the hall empty?"

"He can have 260," the clerk said. "I'll open it."

"You realize this is Jenny's fellow from the school you almost killed?" Marden asked, his voice receding as he moved away beside the clerk.

"Jenny's fellow?" There was the sound of a key in a lock. "But I thought . . ."

"Never mind what you thought!"

Piaget's face moved close to Dasein. "Can you hear me, young fellow?" he asked.

Dasein drew in a painful breath, croaked, "Yes."

"You'll have quite a head, but you'll recover."

Piaget's face went away. Hands picked Dasein up. The ceiling moved. There was another room around him: like the first one—tall ceiling, even the sound of dripping water. He felt a bed beneath his back, hands beginning to undress him. Sudden nausea gripped him. Dasein pushed the hands away.

Someone helped him to the bathroom where he was sick. He felt better afterward—weak, but with a clearer head, a better sense of control over his muscles. He saw it was Piaget who'd helped him.

"Feel like getting back to bed now?" Piaget asked.

"Yes."

"I'll give you a good shot of iron to counteract the gas effect on your blood," Piaget said. "You'll be all right."

"How'd that gas jet get turned on?" Dasein asked. His voice came out a hoarse whisper.

"Johnson got mixed up fooling with the valves in the kitchen," Piaget said. "Wouldn't have been any harm done if some idiot hadn't opened the jet in your room."

"I coulda sworn I had 'em all turned off." That was the clerk's voice from somewhere beyond the bathroom door.

"They better be capped by tomorrow night," Marden said.

They sounded so reasonable, Dasein thought. Marden appeared genuinely angry. The look on Piaget's face could be nothing other than concern.

Could it have been a real accident? Dasein wondered.

He reminded himself then that two men had died by accident in this valley while engaged in the investigation.

"All right," Piaget said. "Al, you and Pim and the others can clear out now. I'll get him to bed."

"Okay, Larry. Clear out, all of you." That was Marden.

"I'll get his bags from the other room." That was a voice Dasein didn't recognize.

Presently, with Piaget's help,

Dasein found himself in pajamas and in bed. He felt clear-headed, wide awake and lonely even with Piaget still in the room.

Among strangers, Dasein thought.

"Here, take this," Piaget said. He pressed two pills into Dasein's mouth, forced a glass of water on him. Dasein gulped, felt the pills rasp down his throat in a wash of water.

"What was that?" Dasein asked as he pushed the glass away.

"The iron and a sedative."

"I don't want to sleep. The gas . . ."

"You didn't get enough gas to make that much difference. Now, you rest easy." Piaget patted his shoulder. "Bed rest and fresh air are the best therapy you can get. Someone'll look in on you from time to time tonight. I'll check back on you in the morning."

"Someone," Dasein said. "A nurse?"

"Yes," Piaget said, his voice brusque. "A nurse. You'll be as safe here as in a hospital."

Dasein looked at the night beyond the room's window. *Why the feeling of danger now, then?* he wondered. *Is it reaction?* He could feel the sedative blurring his senses, soothing him. The sense of danger persisted.

"Jenny will be happy to know you're here," Piaget said. He left the room, turning off the light, closing the door softly.

Dasein felt he had been smothered.

ered in darkness. He fought down panic, restored himself to a semblance of calm.

Jenny . . . Jenny . . .

Marden's odd conversation with the clerk, Johnson, returned to him. ". . . Jenny's fellow from the school . . ."

What had Johnson thought? What was the thing Marden had cut short?

Dasein fought the sedative. The drip-drip of water in the bathroom invaded his awareness. The room was an alien cell.

Was it just an accident?

He remembered the fragmented confusion of the instant when he'd focused on that hissing gas jet. Now, when the danger was past, he felt terror.

It couldn't have been an accident!

But why would Johnson want to kill him?

The disconnected telephone call haunted Dasein. Was the line really down? What would Selador do? Selador knew the dangers here.

Dasein felt the sedative pulling him down into sleep. He tried to focus on the investigation. It was such a fascinating project. He could hear Selador explaining the facets that made the Santaroga Project such a glittering gem—

"Taken singly, no item in this collection of facts could be considered alarming or worthy of extended attention. You might find it interesting that no person

from Cloverdale, California, could be found in a mental hospital. It might be of passing interest to learn that the people of Hope, Missouri, consumed very little tobacco. Would you be alarmed to discover that all the businesses of Enumclaw, Washington, were locally owned? Certainly not. But when you bring all of these and the other facts together into a single community, something disturbing emerges. There is a difference at work here."

The drip of water in the bathroom was a compelling distraction. *Dangerous difference*, Dasein thought. *Who'll look in on me?* he wondered.

It occurred to him to ask himself then who had sounded the alarm. The breaking window had alerted someone. The most likely person would be Johnson, the room clerk. Why would he bring help to the person he was trying to kill? The paranoia in his own thoughts began to impress itself on Dasein.

It was an accident, Dasein thought. *It was an accident in a place of dangerous difference.*

Dasein's morning began with a sensation of hunger. He awoke to cramping pains. Events of the night flooded into his memory. His head felt as though it had been kicked from the inside.

Gently, he pushed himself upright. There was a window directly ahead of him with the green

branch of an oak tree directly across it. As though his muscles were controlled by some hidden force, Dasein found himself looking up at the door to see if there was a gas jst. Nothing but a patch on the wallpaper to mark where one had been met his gaze.

Holding his head as level as possible, Dasein eased himself out of bed and into the bathroom. A cold shower restored some of his sense of reality.

He kept telling himself: *It was an accident.*

A blue jay was sitting on the oak branch screeching when Dasein emerged from the bathroom. The sound sent little clappers of pain through Dasein's head. He dressed hurriedly, hunger urging him. The blue jay had been joined by a companion. They screeched and darted at each other through the oak tree, their topknots twitching. Dasein gritted his teeth faced the mirror to tie his tie. As he was finishing the knot he saw reflected in the mirror the slow inward movement of the hall door. A corner of a wheeled tray appeared. Dishes clattered. The door swung wider.

Jenny appeared in the doorway pushing the tray. Dasein stared at her in the mirror, his hands frozen at the tie. She wore a red dress, her long black hair caught in a matching bandeau. Her skin displayed a healthy tan. Blue eyes stared back at him in the mirror. Her oval face was set in a look of

watchful waiting. Her mouth was as full as he remembered it, hesitating on the edge of a smile, a dimple flickering at her left cheek.

"Finish your tie," she said. "I've brought you some breakfast." Her voice had a well remembered throaty, soothing tone.

Dasein turned, moved toward her as though pulled by strings. Jenny abandoned the cart, met him half way. She came into his arms, lifting her lips to be kissed. Dasein, feeling the warmth of her kiss and the familiar pressure of her against him, experienced a sensation of coming home.

Jenny pulled away, studied his face. "Oh, Gil," she said, "I've missed you so much. Why didn't you even write?"

He stared at her, surprised to silence for a moment, then: "But I did write. You never answered."

She pushed away from him, her features contorted by a scowl. "Ohhh!" She stamped her foot.

"Well, I see you found him." It was Dr. Piaget in the doorway. He pushed the cart all the way into the room, closed the door.

Jenny whirled on him. "Uncle Larry! Did you keep Gil's letters from me?"

Piaget looked from her to Dasein. "Letters? What letters?"

"Gil wrote and I never got the letters!"

"Oh." Piaget nodded. "Well

you know how they are at the post office sometimes — valley girl, fellow from outside.”

“Ohhh! I could scratch their eyes out!”

“Easy, girl.” Piaget smiled at Dasein.

Jenny whirled back into Dasein’s arms, surprised him with another kiss. He broke away slightly breathless.

“There,” she said. “That’s for being here. Those old biddies at the post office can’t dump that in the trash basket.”

“What old biddies?” Dasein asked. He felt he had missed part of the conversation. The warmth of Jenny’s kisses, her open assumption nothing had changed between them, left him feeling defenseless, wary. A year had passed, after all. He’d managed to stay away from here for a year — leaning on his wounded masculine ego, true, fearful he’d find Jenny married . . . lost to him forever. But what had she leaned on? She could’ve come to Berkeley, if only for a visit.

And I could’ve come here.

Jenny grinned.

“Why’re you grinning?” he demanded. “And you haven’t explained this about the post office and the . . .”

“I’m grinning because I’m so happy,” she said. “I’m grinning because I see the wheels going around in your head. Why didn’t one of us go see the other before now? Well, *you’re* here as I

knew you would be. I just *knew* you would be.” She hugged him impulsively, said: “About the post office . . .”

“I think Gilbert’s breakfast is getting cold,” Piaget said. “You don’t mind if I call you Gilbert?”

“He doesn’t mind,” Jennysaid. Her voice was bantering, but there was a sudden stiffness in her body. She pushed away from Dasein.

Piaget lifted a cover from one of the plates on the cart, said: “Jaspers omelette, I see. *Real* Jaspers.”

Jenny spoke defensively with a curious lack of vitality: “I made it myself in Johnson’s kitchen.”

“I see,” Piaget said. “Yes . . . well, perhaps that’s best.” He indicated the plate. “Have at it, Gilbert.”

The thought of food made Dasein’s stomach knot with hunger. He wanted to sit down and bolt the omelette . . . but something made him hesitate. He couldn’t evade the nagging sense of danger.

“What’s this Jaspers business?” he asked.

“Oh, that,” Jenny said, pulling the cart over to the chair by the desk. “That just means something made with a product from the Co-op. This is our cheddar in the omelette. Sit down and eat.”

“You’ll like it,” Piaget said. He crossed the room, put a hand on Dasein’s shoulder, eased him into the chair. “Just let me have a

quick look at you." He pinched Dasein's left ear lobe, studied it, looked at his eyes. "You're looking pretty fit. How's the head?"

"It's better now. It was pretty fierce when I woke up."

"Okay. Eat your breakfast. Take it easy for a day or two. Let me know if you feel nauseated again or have any general symptoms of lethargy. I suggest you eat liver for dinner, and I'll have Jenny bring you some more iron pills. You weren't in there long enough to cause you any permanent trouble."

"When I think of that Mr. Johnson's carelessness, I want to take one of his cleavers to him," Jenny said.

"We *are* bloodthirsty today, aren't we," Piaget said.

Dasein picked up his fork, sampled the omelette. Jenny watched him, waiting. The omelette was delicious — moist and with a faint bite of cheese. He swallowed, smiled at her.

Jenny grinned back. "You know," she said, "that's the first food I ever cooked for you."

"Don't rush him off his feet, girl," Piaget said. He patted her head, said: "I'll leave you two for now. Why don't you bring your young man along home for dinner? I'll have Sarah make what he needs." He glanced at Dasein. "That all right with you?"

Dasein swallowed another bite of the omelette. The cheese left a tangy aftertaste that reminded

him of the unpasteurized beer Burdeaux had served. "I'd be honored, sir," he said.

"Honored, yet," Piaget said. "We'll expect you around seven." He glanced at his wristwatch. "It's almost eight-thirty, Jenny. Aren't you working today?"

"I called George and told him I'd be late."

"He didn't object?"

"He knows . . . I have a friend . . . visiting." She blushed.

"Like that, eh? Well, don't get into any trouble." Piaget turned, lumbered from the room with a head-down purposeful stride.

Jenny turned a shy, questioning smile on Dasein. "Don't mind Uncle Larry," she said. "His mind darts around like that — one subject then another. He's a very real, wonderful person."

"Where do you work?" Dasein asked.

"At the Co-op."

"The cheese factory?"

"Yes, I'm . . . I'm on the inspection line."

Dasein swallowed, reminded himself he was here to do a market study. He was a spy. And what would Jenny say when she discovered that? But Jenny posed a new puzzle. She had a superior talent for clinical psychology — even according to Dr. Selador, whose standards were high. Yet . . . she worked in the cheese factory.

"Isn't there any work . . . in your line here?" he asked.

"It's a good job," she said. She sat down on the edge of the desk, swung her legs. "Finish your breakfast. I didn't make that coffee. It's out of the hotel urn. Don't drink it if it's too strong. There's orange juice in the metal pitcher. I remembered you take your coffee black and didn't bring any . . ."

"Whoa!" he said.

"I'm talking too much I know it," she said. She hugged herself. "Oh, Gil, I'm so happy you're here. Finish your breakfast and you can take me across to the Co-op. Maybe I can take you on the guided tour. It's a fascinating place. There are lots of dark corners back in the storage cave."

Sasein drained his coffee, shook his head. "Jenny, you are incorrigible."

"Gil, you're going to love it here. I know you are," she said.

Dasein wiped his lips on his napkin. She was still in love with him. He could see that in every look. And he . . . he felt the same way about her. It was still *love me love my valley*, though. Her words betrayed it. Dasein sighed. He could see the blank wall of an unresolvable difference looming ahead of them. If her love could stand the discovery of his true role here, could it also stand breaking away from the valley? Would she come away with him?

"Gil, are you all right?" she asked.

He pushed his chair back, got up. "Yes. I'm . . ."

The telephone rang.

Jenny reached behind her on the desk, brought the receiver to her ear. "Dr. Dasein's room." She grinned at Dasein. The grin turned to a scowl. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Pem Johnson, is it? Well, I'll tell you a thing or two, Mr. Johnson! I think you're a criminal the way you almost killed Dr. Dasein! If you'd . . . No! Don't you try to make excuses! Open gas jets in the rooms! I think Dr. Dasein ought to sue you for every cent you have!"

A tinny, rasping noise came from the phone. Dasein recognized only a few words. The grin returned to Jenny's face. "It's Jenny Sorge, that's who it is," she said. "Don't you . . . well, I'll tell you if you'll be quiet for a minute! I'm here bringing Dr. Dasein what the doctor ordered for him — a good breakfast. He doesn't dare eat anything you'd have prepared for him. It'd probably have poison in it!"

Dasein crossed to a trunk stand where his suitcase had been left, opened it. He spoke over his shoulder. "Jenny, what's he want, for heaven's sake?"

She waved him to silence.

Dasein rummaged in the suitcase looking for his briefcase. He tried to remember what had been done with it in the confusion of the previous night, looked around the room. No sign of it. Some-

one had gone to the other room for his things. Maybe whoever it was had missed the briefcase. Dasein thought of the case's contents, wet his lips with his tongue. Every step of his program to unravel the mystery of the Santaroga Barrier was outlined there. In the wrong hands, that information could cause him trouble, throw up new barriers.

"I'll tell him," Jenny said.

"Wait a minute," Dasein said. "I want to talk to him." He took the phone from her. "Johnson?"

"What do you want?" There was that twangy belligerency, but Dasein couldn't blame him after the treatment he'd received from Jenny.

"My briefcase," Dasein said. "It was in the other room. Would you send up someone with a key and . . ."

"Your damned briefcase isn't in that room, mister! I cleaned the place out and I ought to know."

"Then where is it?" Dasein asked.

"If it's that case you were so touchy about last night, I saw Captain Marden leave with something that looked like it last night after all the commotion you caused."

"I caused?" Outrage filled Dasein's voice. "See here, Johnson! You stop twisting the facts!"

After only a heartbeat of silence, Johnson said: "I was, wasn't I? Sorry."

Johnson's abrupt candor dis-

armed the psychologist in Dasein. In a way, it reminded him of Jenny. Santarogans, he found, displayed a lopsided reality that was both attractive and confusing. When he'd collected his thoughts, all Dasein could say was: "What would Marden be doing with my case?"

"That's for him to say and you to find out," Johnson said with all his old belligerence. There was a sharp click as he broke the connection.

Dasein shook his head, put the phone back on its hook.

"Al Marden wants you to have lunch with him at the Blue Ewe," Jenny said.

"Hmmm?" He looked up at her, bemused, her words taking a moment to register. "Marden . . . lunch?"

"Twelve noon. The Blue Ewe's on the Avenue of the Giants where it goes through town . . . on the right just past the first cross street."

"Marden? The Highway patrol captain?"

"Yes. Johnson just passed the message along." She slipped down off the desk, a flash of knees, a swirl of the red skirt. "Come along. Escort me to work."

Dasein picked up his suitcoat, allowed himself to be led from the room.

That damn' briefcase with all its forms and notes and letters, he thought. The whole show!

But it gave him a perverse feeling of satisfaction to know that everything would be out in the open. *I wasn't cut out to be a cloak and dagger type.*

There was no escaping the realization, though, that revelation of his real purpose here would intensify Santaroga's conspiracy of silence.

And how would Jenny react?

Dasein's first impression of the Jaspers Cheese Cooperative with the people at work in and around it was that the place was a hive. It loomed whitely behind its fence as Jenny led him from the Inn. He found it an odd companion for the inn, just across the road, nestled against a steep hill, poking odd squares and rectangles up onto an outcropping. The previous night's brooding look had been replaced by this appearance of humming efficiency with electric carts buzzing across the yard, their platforms loaded with oblong packages. People walked with a leaning sense of purpose.

A hive, Dasein thought. There must be a queen inside and these were the workers, guarding, gathering food.

A uniformed guard, a police dog on a leash beside him, took Dasein's name as Jenny introduced him. The guard opened a gate in the chain link fence. His dog grinned wolfishly at Dasein, whined.

Dasein remembered the baying

he'd heard when he'd first looked down into the valley. That had been less than fourteen hours ago, Dasein relaid. The time felt stretched out, longer. He asked himself why dogs guarded the Coop. The question bothered him.

The yard they crossed was an immaculate concrete surface. Now that he was close to the factory, Dasein saw that it was a complex of structures that had been joined by filling the between areas with odd additions and covered walkways.

Jenny's mood changed markedly once they were well inside the grounds. Dasein saw her become more assertive, sure of herself. She introduced Dasein to four persons while crossing the yard—Willa Burdeaux among them. Willa turned out to be a small husky-voiced young woman with a face that was almost ugly in its tiny, concise sharpness. She had her father's deep-of-darkness skin, a petite figure.

"I met your father last night," Dasein said.

"Daddy told me," she said. She turned a knowing look on Jenny, added: "Anything I can do, just tell me, honey."

"Maybe later," Jenny said. "We have to be running."

"You're going to like it here, Gilbert Dasein," Willa said. She turned away with a wave, hurried across the yard.

Disturbed by the undertones of the conversation, Dasein allowed

himself to be led down a side bay, into a wide door that opened onto an aisle between stacked cartons of Jaspers Cheese. Somewhere beyond the stacks there was a multiplexity of sounds — hissings, stampings, gurgling water, a clank-clank-clank.

The aisle ended in a short flight of wide steps, up to a loading bay with hand trucks racked along its edge. Jenny led him through a door marked office.

It was such an ordinary place—clips of order forms racked along a wall, two desks with women seated at them typing, a long counter with a gate at one end, windows opening onto the yard and a view of the inn, a door labeled "Manager" beyond the women.

The door opened as Dasein and Jenny stopped at the counter. Out stepped one of the card players from the Inn's dining room—the balding sandy hair, the deeply cleft chin and wide mouth—George Nis. The heavily lidded blue eyes swept past Dasein to Jenny.

"Problems in Bay Nine, Jenny," Nis said. "You're needed."

"Oh, darn!" Jenny said.

"I'll take care of your friend," Nis said. "We'll see if we can't let you off early for your dinner date."

Jenny squeezed Dasein's hand, said: "Darling, forgive me. Duty and all that." She blinked a smile at him, whirled and was back

out the door, the red skirt swirling.

The women at their typewriters looked up, seemed to take in Dasein with one look, went back to their work. Nis came to the gate in the counter, opened it.

"Come on in, Dr. Dasein." He extended a hand.

The handshake was firm, casual.

Dasein followed the man into an oak paneled office, unable to get his mind off the fact that Nis knew about the dinner date with Jenny. How could the man know? Piaget had extended the invitation only a few minutes before.

They sat down separated by a wide desk, its top empty of papers. The chairs were padded, comfortable with sloping arms. In large frames behind Nis hung an aerial photograph of the Co-op and what appeared to be a ground plan. Dasein recognized the layout of the yard and front of the building. The back became heavy dark lines that wandered off into the hill like the tributaries of a river. They were labeled with the initial 'J' and numbers — 'J-5' ... 'J-14' ...

Nis saw the direction of Dasein's gaze, said: "Those are the storage caverns — constant temperature and humidity." He coughed discreetly behind a hand, said: "You catch us at an embarrassing moment Dr. Dasein. I've nobody I can release to show you through the plant. Could Jenny

bring you back another day?"

"At your convenience," Dasein said. He studied Nis, feeling oddly wary, on guard.

"Please don't wear any cologne or hair dressing or anything like that when you come," Nis said. "You'll notice that our women wear no makeup, and we don't allow female visitors from outside to go into the cave or storage areas. It's quite easy to contaminate the culture, give an odd flavor to an entire batch."

Dasein was suddenly acutely aware of the aftershave lotion he'd used that morning.

"I'll be pure and clean," he said. He looked to the right out the windows, caught suddenly by motion there on the road between the Co-op and the Inn.

A peculiar high-wheeled vehicle went lurching past. Dasein counted eight pairs of wheels. They appeared to be at least fifteen feet in diameter, big ballooning doughnuts that hummed on the pavement. The wheels were slung on heavy arms like insect legs.

In an open cab, high up in front, four leashed hounds seated behind him, rode Al Marden. He appeared to be steering by using two vertical handles.

"What in the devil is that?" Dasein demanded. He jumped up, crossed to the window to get a better look at the machine as it sped down the road. "Isn't that Captain Marden driving it?"

"That's our game warden's

bush buggy," Nis said. "Al acts as game warden sometimes when the regular man's sick or busy on something else. Must've been out patrolling the south hills. Heard there were some deer hunters from outside messing around there this morning."

"You don't allow outsiders to hunt in the valley, is that it?"

"Nobody hunts in the valley," Nis corrected him. "Too much chance of stray bullets hitting someone. Most of the people around this area know our law, but we occasionally get someone from down south who blunders in. There're very few places the buggy can't get to them, though. We set them straight in a hurry."

Dasein imagined that giant wheeled monstrosity lurching over the brush, descending on some hapless hunter who'd blundered into the valley. He found his sympathies with the hunter.

"I've never seen a vehicle like that before," Dasein said. "Something new?"

"Sam, Sam Scheler, built the bush buggy ten, twelve years ago," Nis said. "We were getting poachers from over by Porterville. They don't bother us anymore."

"I imagine not."

"Hope you'll forgive me," Nis said. "I do have a great deal of work and we're shorthanded today. Get Jenny to bring you back later in the week . . . after . . . well, later in the week."

After what? Dasein wondered. He found himself oddly alert. He'd never before felt this clear-headed. He wondered if it could be some strange aftereffect of the gas.

"I'll, ah, let myself out," he said, rising.

"The gate guard will be expecting you," Nis said. He remained seated, his gaze fixed on Dasein with an odd intensity until the door closed between them.

The women in the outer office glanced up as Dasein let himself through the counter gate, went back to their work. A gang of men was loading hand trucks on the ramp when Dasein emerged. He felt their eyes boring into him as he made his way down the dock above them. A sliding door off to the left opened suddenly. Dasein glimpsed a long table with a conveyor belt down its middle, a line of men and women working along it, sorting packages.

Something about the people in that line caught his attention. They were oddly dull-eyed, slow in their actions. Dasein saw their legs beneath the table. The legs appeared to be held in stocks.

The door closed.

Dasein continued out into the sunshine, disturbed by what he had seen. Those workers had appeared . . . mentally retarded. He crossed the yard wondering. Problems in Bay 9? Jenny was a competent psychologist. More than competent. What did she do

here? What did she *really* do?

The gate guard nodded to him, said: "Come again Dr. Dasein." The man went into his little house, lifted a telephone, spoke briefly into it.

'The gate guard will be expecting you,' Dasein thought.

He crossed to the Inn, ran lightly up the steps and into the lobby. A gray-haired woman sat behind the desk working at an adding machine. She looked up at Dasein.

"Could I get a line out to Berkeley?" he asked.

"All the lines are out," she said. "Some trouble with a brush fire."

"Thanks."

Dasein went outside, paused on the long porch, scanned the sky. Brush fire? There wasn't a sign or smell of smoke.

Everything about Santaroga could appear so natural, he thought, if it weren't for the underlying sense of strangeness and secrecy that made his neck hairs crawl.

Dasein took a deep breath, went down to his truck, nursed it to life.

This time, he took the turn to 'City Center.' The Avenue of the Giants widened to four lanes presently with homes and business mixed at seeming random on both sides. A park opened on the left — paved paths, central bandstand, flower borders. Beyond the park, a stone church lifted an imposing spire into the sky. The sign on its

lawn read: "Church of All Faiths . . . Sermon: 'Intensity of God response as a function of anxiety.'"

Intensity of God response? Dasein wondered. It was quite the oddest sermon announcement he had ever seen. He made a mental note to try and catch that sermon on Sunday.

The people on the streets began to catch Dasein's attention. Their alertness, the brisk way they moved, was a contrast to the dullness of the line he'd seen in the Co-op. Who were those dull creatures? For that matter, who were these swiftly striding folk on the streets?

There was vitality and a happy freedom in the people he saw, Dasein realized. He wondered if the mood could be infectious. He had never felt more vital himself.

Dasein noted a sign on his right just past the park: a gambling sheep with the letters "Blue Ewe" carved in a rolling script. It was a windowless front faced with blue stone, an impersonal facade broken only by wide double doors containing one round glass port each.

So Marden wanted to have lunch with him there. Why? It seemed obvious the patrol captain had taken the briefcase. Was he going to pull the 'go-and-never-darken-my-door' routine he'd used on the hapless salesman in the dining room of the Inn? Or would it be something more subtle designed for 'Jenny's

friend from the school?"

At the far end of the town, the street widened once more to open a broad access to a twelve-sided service station. Dasein slowed his truck to admire the structure. It was the largest service station he had ever seen. A canopy structure jutted from each of the twelve sides. Beneath each canopy were three rows of pumps, each row designed to handle four vehicles. Just beyond it, separated from the giant wheel of the station, stood a building containing rows of grease racks. Behind the station was a football-field sized parking area with a large building at the far end labeled "Garage."

Dasein drove into the station, stopped at an outside row of pumps, got out to study the layout. He counted twenty grease racks, six cars being serviced. Cars were coming and going all around him. It was another hive. He wondered why none of the datum-data mentioned this complex. The place swarmed with young men in neat blue-gray uniforms.

One of the neat young men came trotting up to Dasein, said: "What grade, sir?"

"Grade?"

"What octane gas do you want?"

"What do you have?"

"Eighty, ninety and a hundred-plus."

"Fill it with ninety and check the oil."

Dasein left the young man to his labors, walked out toward the street to get a better perspective on the station. It covered at least four acres, he estimated. He returned to the truck as the young man emerged from beneath the hood holding the dipstick.

"Your oil's down a bit more than a quart," the young man said.

"Put in thirty weight detergent," Dasein said.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I heard this clunker drive in. We carry an aircraft grade of forty weight. I'd recommend you use it. You won't burn quite as much."

"What's it cost?"

"Same as all the others — thirty-five cents a quart."

"Okay," Dasein shook his head. Aircraft grade at that price? Where did *Mr. Sam* buy it?

"How do you like Santaroga?" the young man asked, his voice bright with the invitation for a compliment.

"Fine," Dasein said. "Beautiful little town. You know, this is the biggest service station I've ever seen. It's a wonder there haven't been any newspaper or magazine articles about it."

"Old Sam doesn't cotton to publicity," the attendant said.

"Why's it so damn' big?" Dasein asked.

"Has to be big. It's the only one in the valley." The young man worked his way around the

engine, checking the water in the radiator, the level in the battery. He grinned at Dasein. "Kinda surprises most outsiders. We find it handy. Some of the farmers have their own pumps and there's service at the airport, but they all get their supplies through Sam." He closed the hood.

"And where does Old Sam get *his* supplies?"

The attendant leveled a probing stare at Dasein. "I sure hope you haven't taken on a sideline with one of the big oil companies, sir," he said. "If you're thinking of selling to Sam, forget it."

"I'm just curious," Dasein said. The attendant's choice of words was puzzling. *Sideline?* Dasein chose to ignore it for the moment, intent on the larger question.

"Sam orders his supplies once a year on open bid," the attendant said. He topped off the truck's gas tank, returned the hose to its holder. "This year it's a little company in Oklahoma. They truck it up here in convoys."

"That so?"

"I wouldn't say if it weren't."

"I wasn't questioning your word," Dasein said. "I was registering surprise."

"Don't see much to get surprised about. Person ought to buy where he gets the most value for his money. That'll be three dollars and three cents."

Dasein counted out the change, said: "Is there a pay phone around here?"

"If you're making a local call, there's a phone inside you can use, Dr. Dasein," the attendant said. "The pay phones are over there beside the rack building, but no sense wasting your time if you're calling outside. Lines are down. There was a fire over on the ridge."

Dasein went to full alert, glared at the attendant. "How'd you know my name?" he demanded.

"Heck, mister, it's all over town. You're Jenny's fellow from the city. You're the reason she sends all the locals packing."

The grin that went with this statement should have been completely disarming, but it only made Dasein more wary.

"You're going to like it here," the attendant said. "Everybody does." The grin faded somewhat. "If you'll excuse me, sir. I've other cars to service."

Dasein found himself staring at a retreating back. *He suspected I might represent an oil company*, Dasein thought, *but he knows my name . . . and he knows about Jenny*. It was a curious disparity and Dasein felt it should tell him something. It could be the simple truth, though.

A long green Chrysler Imperial pulled into the empty space on the other side of the pumps. The driver, a fat man smoking a cigarette in a holder, leaned out, asked: "Hey! This the road out to 395?"

"Straight ahead," Dasein said.

"Any gas stations along the way?"

"Not here in the valley," Dasein said. "Maybe something outside." He shrugged. "I've never been out that way."

"You damn' natives," the driver growled. The Imperial shot ahead in a surge of power, swerved out onto the avenue and was gone.

"Up yours," Dasein muttered. "Who the hell you calling a native?"

He climbed into his truck, turned back the way he had come. At the fork, he headed up the mountain toward Porterville. The road climbed up, up — winding its way out of the redwoods and into a belt of oaks. He came at last to the turn off where he'd taken his first long look at the valley. He pulled out and parked.

A light smoky haze obscured details, but the Co-op stood out plainly and the slash burner of a sawmill off to the left. The town itself was a patch of color in the trees — tile roofs — and there was a serpentine river line out of the hills straight across from him. Dasein glanced at his wristwatch — five minutes to ten. He debated going out to Porterville and placing his call to Selador there. That would crowd him on the date with Marden, though. He decided to post a letter to Selador, have the "burned out phone lines" story checked from that end.

Without his briefcase and notes, Dasein felt at a disadvantage. He rummaged in the glove compartment, found a small gas-record notebook and stub of pencil, began setting down his observations for later formal entry in his report.

"The township itself is small," he wrote, "but it appears to serve a large market area. There are a great many people about during the day. Note 12 double pumps in service station. Transients?

"Odd alertness about the natives. Sharpness of attitude toward each other and *outsiders*.

"Question local use of Jaspers products. Why won't the cheese travel? What's the reason for the decided local preference? It tastes different from what I bought outside. What about aftertaste? Subjective? What relationship to the beer?

"Investigate use of Jaspers as a label. Adjective?"

Something big and moving through the trees on the hill beyond the Co-op. The movement caught Dasein's attention. He studied it a moment. Too many trees intervened to permit a clear look.

Dasein went around to the camper back, found his binoculars there. He focused them on the movement in the trees. The doughnut-wheeled bush buggy leaped into view. Marden was driving. It threaded its way through trees and buck brush. The thing appeared to be herding

something . . . or someone. Dasein scanned ahead for a clearing, found one, waited. Three men in hunting clothes emerged, hands clasped over their heads. Two dogs flanked them, watchful, guarding. The hunters appeared angry, frightened.

The group angled down into a stand of redwoods, was lost to view. Dasein climbed back into the cab, made a note on what he had seen.

It was all of a pattern, he thought. There were things that could be resolved by natural, logical explanations. A law enforcement officer had picked up three illegal hunters. That was what law enforcement officers were supposed to do. But the incident carried what Dasein was coming to recognize as a Santaroga twist. There was something about it out of phase with the way the rest of the world operated.

He headed his truck back into the valley, determined to question Marden about the captive hunters.

The Blue Ewe's interior was a low-key grotto, its walls painted in varying intensities of pastel blue. Rather ordinary banquette booths with tables flanked an open area of tables and chairs. A long bar with a mirror decorated by dancing sheep occupied the back wall.

Marden awaited him in one of the booths. A tall iced drink stood in front of him. The Patrol cap-

tain appeared relaxed, his red hair neatly combed. The collar tabs of his uniform shirt carried the double bars of a captain. He wore no coat. His eyes followed Dasein's approach with an alert directness.

"Care for a drink?" he asked as Dasein sat down.

"What's that you're having?" Dasein nodded at the iced drink.

"Kind of an orange beer with Jaspers."

"I'll try it," Dasein said.

Marden raised a hand toward the bar, called: "Another ade, Jim." He returned his attention to Dasein. "How's your head today?"

"I'm fine," Dasein said. He found himself feeling edgy, wondering how Marden would bring up the subject of the briefcase. The drink was put in front of him. Dasein welcomed it as a distraction, sipped it. His tongue encountered a sharp orange flavor with the tangy, biting overtone of Jaspers.

"Oh, about your briefcase," Marden said.

Dasein put down his drink with careful deliberation, met Marden's level, measuring stare. "Yes?"

"Hope it hasn't inconvenienced you, my taking it."

"Not too much."

"I was curious about technique mostly," Marden said. "I already knew why you were here, of course."

SANTAROGA BARRIER



"Oh?" Dasein studied Marden carefully for a clue to the man's mood. How could he know about the project?

Marden took a long swallow of the orange beer, wiped his mouth.

"Great stuff, this."

"Very tasty," Dasein agreed.

"You've laid out a pretty routine approach, really," Marden said. He stared at Dasein. "You know, I've the funny feeling you don't realize how you're being used."

There was amusement in Marden's narrow face. It touched off abrupt anger in Dasein, and he struggled to hide his reaction. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Would it interest you to know you've been a subject of discussion before our Town Council?" Marden asked.

"Me?"

"You. Several times. We knew they'd get to you sooner or later. Took 'em longer than we expected." Marden shook his head. "We circulated a photograph of you to key people — waiters, waitresses, bartenders, clerks . . ."

"Service station attendants," Dasein said. The pattern was becoming clear. He made no attempt to conceal his anger. How dared they?

Marden was sweet reasonable. "They were bound to get wind of the fact that one of our girls was sweet on you," he said. "That's an edge, you understand.

You use any edge you can find."

"Who's this *they* you keep referring to?" Dasein demanded.

"Hmmm," Marden said.

Dasein took three deep breaths to calm himself. He had never really expected to hide his purpose here indefinitely, but he had hoped for more time before exposure. What the devil was this crazy patrol captain talking about?

"You pose quite a problem," Marden said.

"Well, don't try tossing me out of the valley the way you did that stupid salesman last night or those hunters you got today," Dasein said. "I'm obeying the law."

"Toss you out? Wouldn't think of it. Say, what would you like to eat? We did come here for lunch."

Dasein found himself psychologically off balance, his anger diverted by this sudden change of subject, his whole attitude hampered by feelings of guilt.

"I'm not hungry," he growled.

"You will be by the time the food gets here. I'll order for both of us." Marden signaled the waiter, said: "Two salads Jaspers on the special lunch."

"I'm not hungry," Dasein insisted.

"You will be." Marden smiled.

"Hear a big two-fisted outsider in a Chrysler Imperial called you a native today. Did that tick you off?"

"News certainly gets around here," Dasein said.

"It certainly does, Doc. Of course, what that fellow's *mistake* says to me is that you're just a natural Santarogan. Jenny didn't make any mistake about *you*."

"Jenny has nothing to do with this."

"She has everything to do with it Doc. Larry needs another psychologist and Jenny says you're one of the best. We can make a good place here in the valley for a fellow like you."

"How big a place?" Dasein asked, his mind on the two investigators who'd died here. "About six feet long and six feet deep?"

"Why don't you stop running away from yourself, Dasein?"

"I learned early," Dasein said, "that a good run was better than a bad stand."

"Huh?" Marden turned a puzzled frown on him.

"I'm not running away from myself," Dasein said. "That's what I mean. But I'm not going to stand still while you order my life for me the way you ordered those salads."

"You don't like the food, you don't have to eat it," Marden said. "Am I to understand you won't consider the job Larry's offering?"

Dasein looked down at the table, absorbing the implications of the offer. The smart thing would be to play along, he knew. This was his opportunity to get

behind the Santaroga Barrier, to find out what really went on in the valley. But he couldn't escape the thought of the Town Council at its meetings, questioning Jenny about him, no doubt, discussing *preparations* for the Dasein invasion! The anger wouldn't stay down.

"You and Jenny and the rest, you have it all figured out, eh?" he asked. "Throw the poor sucker a bone. Buy him off with a . . ."

"Slack off, Doc," Marden said. The voice was level and still with that tone of amusement. "I'm appealing to your intelligence, not to your greed. Jenny says you're a very sharp fellow. That's what we're counting on."

Dasein gripped his hands into fists beneath the table, brought himself under control. So they thought he was a poor innocent jerk to be maneuvered by a pretty female and money!

"You think I'm being used," he said.

"We *know* you're being used."

"You haven't said by whom."

"Who's behind it? A group of financiers, Doc, who don't like what Santaroga represents. They want in and they can't get in."

"The Santaroga Barrier," Dasein said.

"That's what they call it."

"Who are *they*?"

"You want names? Maybe we'll give them to you if that suits our purposes."

"You want to use me too?"

"That isn't the way Santaroga runs, Dasein."

The salads came. Dasein looked down into an inviting array of greens, diced chicken and a creamy golden dressing. A pang of hunger gripped him. He sampled a bite of chicken with the dressing, tasted the now familiar tang of a Jaspers cheese in it. The damned stuff was ubiquitous, he thought. But he had to admit it was delicious. Perhaps there was something in the claim that it wouldn't travel.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" Marden asked.

"Yes, it is." He studied the patrol captain a moment. "How does Santaroga run, Captain?"

"Council government with Town Meeting veto, annual elections. Every resident above age eighteen has one vote."

"Basic Democracy," Dasein said. "Very nice when you have a community this size, but . . ."

"We had three thousand voters and fifty-eight hundred proxies at the last Town Meeting," Marden said. "It can be done if people are interested in governing themselves. We're interested, Dasein. That's how Santaroga's run."

Dasein gulped the bite of salad in his mouth, put down his fork. Almost nine thousand people over eighteen in the valley! That was twice as many as he'd estimated. What did they all do? A place like this couldn't exist by

taking in each other's wash.

"You want me to marry Jenny, settle here — another voter," Dasein said. "Is that it?"

"That's what Jenny appears to want. We tried to discourage her, but . . ." He shrugged.

"Discourage her — like interfering with the mails?"

"What?"

Dasein saw Marden's obvious puzzlement, told him about the lost letters.

"Those damn' biddies," Marden said. "I guess I'll have to go town there and read them the riot act. But that doesn't change things, really."

"No?"

"No. You love Jenny, don't you?"

"Of course I love her!"

It was out before Dasein could consider his answer. He heard his own voice, realized how basic this emotion was. Of course he loved Jenny. He'd been sick with longing for her. It was a wonder he'd managed to stay away this long—testimony to wounded masculine pride and the notion he'd been rejected.

Stupid pride!

"Well, fine," Marden said. "Finish your lunch, go look around the valley, and tonight you talk things over with Jenny."

He can't really believe it's that simple, Dasein thought.

"Here," Marden said. He brought Dasein's briefcase from the seat, put it on the table be-

tween them. "Make your market study. They already know everything you can find out. That's not really how they want to use you."

"How *do* they want to use me?"

"Find out for yourself, Doc. That's the only way you'll believe it."

Marden returned to his salad, eating with gusto.

Dasein put down his fork, asked: "What happened to those hunters you picked up today?"

"We cut off their heads and pickled them," Marden said. "What'd you think? They were fined and sent packing. You want to see the court records?"

"What good would that do?"

"You know, Doc," Marden said, pointing a fork at Dasein, "you're taking this much the same way Win did—Win Burdeaux!"

Taking what? Dasein wondered. But he asked: "*How* did Win take it?"

"He fought it. That's according to pattern, naturally. He caved in rather quickly, though, as I remember. Win was tired of running even before he got to Santaroga."

"You amateur psychologists," Dasein sneered.

"That's right, Doc. We could use another good professional."

Dasein felt baffled by Marden's unassailable good nature.

"Eat your salad," Marden said. "It's good for what ails you."

Dasein took another bite of the chicken drenched in Jaspers sauce. He had to admit the food was making him feel better. His head felt clear, mind alert. Hunger crept up on one at times, he knew. Food took off the pressures, allowed the mind to function.

Marden finished eating, sat back.

"You'll come around," he said. "You're confused now, but if you're as sharp as Jenny says, you'll see the truth for yourself. I think you'll like it here."

Marden slid out of the booth, stood up.

"I'm just supposed to take your word for it that I'm being used," Dasein said.

"I'm not running you out of the valley, am I?" Marden asked.

"Are the phone lines still burned out?" Dasein asked.

"Darned if I know," Marden said. He glanced at his watch. "Look, I have work to do. Call me after you've talked to Jenny."

With that, he left.

The waiter came up, started collecting dishes.

Dasein looked up into the man's round face, took in the grey hair, the bent shoulders. "Why do you live here?" he asked.

"Huh?" The voice was a gravelly baritone.

"Why do you live in Santaroga?" Dasein asked.

"You nuts? This is my home."

"But why this place rather than

San Francisco, say, or Los Angeles?"

"You are nuts! What could I get there I can't get here?" He left with the dishes.

Dasein stared at his briefcase on the table. Market study. On the seat beyond it, he could see the corner of a newspaper. He reached across the table, captured the paper. The masthead read: "Santaroga Press."

The left-hand column carried an international news summary whose brevity and language startled Dasein. It was composed of paragraph items, one item per story.

Item: "Those nuts are still killing each other in Southeast Asia."

It slowly dawned on Dasein that this was the Vietnam news.

Item: "The dollar continues to slip on the international money market, although this fact is being played down or suppressed on the national news. The crash is going to make Black Friday look like a picnic."

Item: "The Geneva disarmament talks are disarming nobody except the arrogant and the complacent. We recall that the envoys were still talking the last time the bombs began to fall."

Item: "The United States Government is still expanding that big hidey hole under the mountain down by Denver. Wonder how many military bigshots, government officials and their families have tickets into there for

when the blowup comes?"

Item: "France thumbed its nose at the U.S. again this week, said to keep U.S. military airplanes off French airbases. Do they know something we don't know?"

Item: "Automation nipped another .4 percent off the U.S. job market last month. The bites are getting bigger. Does anyone have a guess as to what's going to happen to the excess population?"

Dasein lowered the paper, stared at it without seeing it. The damned thing was subversive! Was it written by a pack of Communists? Was that the secret of Santaroga?

He looked up to see the waiter standing beside him.

"That your newspaper?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"Oh. I guess Al must've given it to you." He started to turn away.

"Where does this restaurant buy its food?" Dasein asked.

"From all over the valley, Dr. Dasein. Our beef comes from Ray Allison's ranch up at the head of the valley. Our chickens come from Mrs. Larson's place out west of here. The vegetables and things we get at the greenhouses."

"Oh. Thanks." Dasein returned to the newspaper.

"You want anything else, Dr. Dasein? Al said to give you anything you want. It's on his bill."

"No, thank you."

The waiter left Dasein to the

paper. He began scanning through it. There were eight pages, only a few advertisements at the beginning, and half the back page turned over to classified. The display ads were rather flat announcements: "Brenner and Sons have a new consignment of bedroom furniture at reasonable prices. First come, first served. These are all first quality local."

"Four new freezer lockers (16 cubic feet) are available at the Lewis Market. Call for rates." The illustration was a smiling fat man holding open the door of a freezer locker.

The classified advertisements were mostly for trades: "Have thirty yards of hand-loomed wool (54 inches wide) — need a good chain saw. Call Ed Jankey at Number One Mill."

"That '56 Ford one-ton truck I bought two years ago is still running. Sam Scheler says its worth about \$50 or a good heifer. William McCoy, River Junction."

Dasein began thumbing back through the paper. There was a garden column: "It's time to turn the toads loose in your garden to keep down the snails."

And one of the inside pages had a full column of meeting notices. Reading the column, Dasein was caught by a repetitive phrase: "Jaspers will be served."

Jaspers will be served, he thought, *Jaspers . . . Jaspers . . .* It was everywhere. Did they real-

ly consume that much of the stuff? He sensed a hidden significance in the word. It was a unifying thing, something peculiarly Santarogan.

Dasein turned back to the newspaper. A reference in a classified ad caught his eye: "I will trade two years' use of one half of my Jaspers Locker (20 cubic feet in level five of the Old Section) for six months of carpenter work. Leo Marriot, 1018 River Road."

What the devil was a Jaspers Locker? Whatever it was, ten cubic feet of it for two years was worth six months' carpentry—no small item, perhaps four thousand dollars.

A splash of sunlight brought his head up in time to see a young couple enter the restaurant. The girl was dark haired with deeply set brown eyes and beautiful winged eyebrows, her young man fair, blue eyed, a chiseled Norman face. They took the booth behind Dasein. He watched them in the tilted bar mirror. The young man glanced over his shoulder at Dasein, said something to the girl. She smiled.

The waiter served them two cold drinks.

Presently, the girl said: "After the Jaspers, we sat there and listened to the sunset, a rope and a bird."

"Sometime you should feel the fur on the water," he companion said. "It's the red upness of the wind."

Dasein came to full alert. That haunting, elusive quality of almost-meaning — it was schizophrenic or like the product of a psychedelic. He strained to hear more, but they had their heads together, whispering, laughing.

Abruptly, Dasein's memory darted back more than three years to his department's foray into LSD experiments and he recalled that Jenny Sorge, the graduate student from Santaroga, had demonstrated an apparent immunity to the drug. The experiments, abandoned in the glare of sensational LSD publicity, had never confirmed this finding, and Jenny had refused to discuss it. The memory of that one report returned to plague Dasein now.

Why should I recall that? he wondered.

The young couple finished whatever they'd ordered, got up and left the restaurant.

Dasein folded the newspaper, started to put it into his briefcase. A hand touched his arm. He looked up to find Marden staring down at him.

"I believe that's my paper," he said. He took it from Dasein's hand. "I was halfway to the forks before I remembered it. See you later." He hurried out, the paper tucked under his arm.

The causal brusqueness, the speed with which he'd been relieved of that interesting publication, left Dasein feeling angry. He grabbed up his briefcase, ran for the door,

was in time to see Marden pulling away from the curb in a patrol car.

To hell with you! he thought. *I'll get another one.*

The drugstore on the corner had no newspaper racks and the skinny clerk informed him coldly that the local newspaper could be obtained "by subscription only." He professed not to know where it was published. The clerk in the hardware store down the street gave him the same answer as did the cashier in the grocery store across from where he'd parked his truck.

Dasein climbed into the cab, opened his briefcase and made notes on as many of the paper's items as he could recall. When his memory ran dry, he started up the truck and began cruising up and down the town's streets looking for the paper's sign or a job printing shop. He found nothing indicating a Santaroga Press was printed in the town, but the signs in a used car lot brought him to an abrupt stop across the street. He sat there staring at the signs.

A four-year-old Buick bore the notice in its window: "This one's an oil burner but a good buy at \$100."

On a year-old Rover: "Cracked block, but you can afford to put a new motor in it at this price: \$500."

On a ten-year-old Chevrolet: "This car owned and maintained

by Jersey Hofstedder. His widow only wants \$650 for it."

His curiosity fully aroused, Dasein got out and crossed to Jersey Hofstedder's Chevrolet, looked in at the dash. The odometer recorded sixty-one thousand miles. The upholstery was leather, exquisitely fitted and tailored. Dasein couldn't see a scratch on the finish and the tires appeared to be almost new.

"You want to test drive it, Dr. Dasein?"

It was a woman's voice, and Dasein turned to find himself face to face with a handsome grey-haired matron in a floral blouse and blue jeans. She had a big, open face, smoothly tanned skin.

"I'm Clara Scheler, Sam's mother," she said. "I guess you've heard of my Sam by now."

"And you know me, of course," Dasein said, barely concealing his anger. "I'm Jenny's fellow from the city."

"Saw you this morning with Jenny," she said. "That's one fine girl there, Dr. Dasein. Now, if you're interested in Jersey's car, I can tell you about it."

"Please do," Dasein said.

"Folks around here know how Jersey was," she said. "He was a goldanged perfectionist, that's what. He had every moving part of this car out on his bench. He balanced and adjusted and fitted until it's just about the sweetest running thing you ever

heard. Got disc brakes now, too. You can see what he did to the upholstery."

"Who was Jersey Hofstedder?" Dasein asked.

"Who . . . oh, that's right, you're new. Jersey was Sam's chief mechanic until he died about a month ago. His widow kept the Cord touring car Jersey was so proud of, but she says a body can only drive one car at a time. She asked me to sell the Chevy. Here, listen to it."

She slipped behind the wheel, started the motor.

Dasein bent close to the hood. He could barely hear the engine running.

"Got dual ignition," Clara Scheler said. "Jersey bragged he could get thirty miles to the gallon with her, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

"Neither would I," Dasein said.

"You want to pay cash or credit?" Clara Scheler asked.

"I . . . haven't decided to buy it," Dasein said.

"You and Jenny couldn't do better than starting out with Jersey's old car," she said. "You're going to have to get rid of that clunker you drove up in. I heard it. That one isn't long for this world unless you do something about those bearings."

"I . . . if I decide to buy it, I'll come back with Jenny," Dasein said. "Thank you for showing it to me." He turned, ran back to his truck with a feeling of escape.

He had been strongly tempted to buy Jersey Hofstедder's car and found this astonishing. The woman must be a master salesman.

He drove back to the Inn, his mind in a turmoil over the strange personality which Santaroga presented. The bizarre candor of those used car signs, the ads in the Santaroga Press — they were all of the same pattern.

Casual honesty, Dasein thought. That could be brutal at the wrong time.

He went up to his room, lay down on the bed to try to think things through, make some sense out of the day. Marden's conversation over lunch sounded even more strange in review. A job with Piaget's clinic? The hauntingly obscure conversation of the young couple in the restaurant plagued him. Drugged? And the newspaper which didn't exist. — except by subscription. Jersey Hofstедder's car — Dasein was tempted to go back and buy it, drive it out to have it examined by an *outside* mechanic.

A persistent murmuring of voices began to intrude on Dasein's awareness. He got up, looked around the room, but couldn't locate the source. The edge of sky visible through his window was beginning to gray. He walked over, looked out. Clouds were moving in from the northwest.

The murmur of voices continued.

Dasein made a circuit of the

room, stopped under a tiny ventilator in the corner above the dresser. The desk chair gave him a step up onto the dresser and he put his ear to the ventilator. Faint but distinct, a familiar television jingle advertising chewing gum came from the opening.

Smiling at himself, Dasein stepped down off the dresser. It was just somebody watching TV. He frowned. This was the first evidence he'd found that they even had TV in the valley. He considered the geography of the area — a basin. To receive TV in here would require an antenna on one of the surrounding hills, amplifiers, a long stretch of cable.

Back onto the dresser he went, ear to the ventilator. He found he could separate the TV show (a daytime serial) from a background conversation between three or four women. One of the women appeared to be instructing another in knitting. Several times he heard the word "Jaspers" and once, very distinctly, "a vision, that's all; just a vision."

Dasein climbed down from the dresser, went into the hall. Between his door and the window at the end with its "Exit" sign there were no doors. Across the hall, yes, but not on this side. He stepped back into his room, studied the ventilator. It appeared to go straight through the wall, but appearances could be deceiving. It might come from

another floor. What was in this whole rear corner of the building, though? Dasein was curious enough now to investigate.

Downstairs he trotted, through the empty lobby, outside and around to the back. There was the oak tree, a rough-barked patriarch, one big branch curving across a second floor window. That window must be his, Dasein decided. It was in the right place and the branch confirmed it. A low porch roof over a kitchen service area angled outward beneath the window. Dasein swept his gaze toward the corner, counted three other windows in that area where no doors opened into a room. All three windows were blank with drawn shades.

No doors, but three windows, Dasein thought.

He set a slower pace back up to his room. The lobby was still empty, but there were sounds of voices and the switchboard from the office behind the desk.

Once more in his room, Dasein stood at the window, looked down on the porch roof. The slope was shallow, shingles dry. He eased open the window, stepped out onto the roof. By leaning against the wall, he found he could work his way sideways along the roof.

At the first window, he took a firm grip on the ledge, looked for a gap in the curtain. There was no opening, but the sound of the TV was plain when he pressed his ear against the glass.

He heard part of a soap commercial and one of the women in the room saying: "That's enough of this channel, switch to NBC."

Dasein drew back, crept to the next window. There was a half-inch gap at the bottom of the shade. He almost lost his balance bending to peer in it, caught himself, took a firm grip on the ledge and crouched to put his eyes to the gap.

The swimming wash of cathode grey in a shadowy room met his gaze. He could just make out a bank of eight TV receivers against the wall at his right. Five women sat in comfortable arm chairs at a good viewing distance from the screen. One of the women he noted with some satisfaction was knitting. Another appeared to be making notes on a short-hand pad. Yet another was operating some sort of recorder.

There was a businesslike women-at-work look about the group. They appeared to be past middle age, but when they moved, it was with the grace of people who remained active. A blonde woman with a good figure stood up on the right, racked a clipboard across the face of the top right hand screen, turned off the set. She flopped back into her chair with an exaggerated fatigue, spoke loudly:

"My God! Imagine letting that stuff pour uncensored into your brain day after day after day after . . ."

Continued on page 119



Although the name Geoff St. Reynard may not ring a bell for some of you newer readers out there, oldtimers will probably remember that a couple of decades ago this Robert W. Krepps pseudonym graced a dozen or so entertaining fantasies which first ran here when Fantastic was young. Probably the funniest of which is still the following light-hearted account of the fiendish punishment meted out to a jaded Earthman who dared to have a little fun—but at a Martian's expense!

FIVE YEARS IN THE MARMALADE GEOFF ST. REYNARD

Illustrated by BILL TERRY

FRESH from Alpha Centauri, fresh from the wicked glare of all those gigantic suns, still ridden by the memory of drinking water that tasted like quicksilver and curious pawing little Centaurians who smelt of decayed garlic, Moleath and D'Angeur flopped bonelessly into a pair of cushioned seats opposite the great plastiglass north casement of Old Terra Spaceport IV. They heaved a sigh of luxurious relief in perfect concert. They were home.

"Never again," said Moleath. "Not this century, anyway. Not until they find a way to make it taste like water."

"And deodorize the natives..." agreed D'Angeur emphatically.

"And allow Venusian comfort-women..."

"And decide to buy radium, the idiots, blast 'em!" finished Moleath, grinning, for they were advance agents for a radium syndicate.

"Yes, that especially. Whistle up a couple of beakers of gim,"

said the other. "I swear I still taste mercury."

Moleath whistled shrilly between his white teeth. "What say to a vacation, Robespierre?" he said abruptly, using the Frenchman's nickname. "A time-trip to Rome for a week? Julius Caesar's Rome, I mean. Have a tailor make us a toga apiece, and—ah, the gim," as a waiter skidded up with two scarlet glasses of the liquor-mix. "Here's plenty of space and a roaring ship."

"And an ivory moon to land on," said D'Angeur, completing the traditional toast of the Astral Travelers.

Moleath drank and smacked his lips. "Man!" His face lit up. "No more quicksilver!"

They were silent then, watching through the casement with contented eyes the efficient brisk workings of the spaceport spread out before them.

The ship that had carried them home, the enormous silver *Comet Twelve*, lay in her lane like a sleek metal panther awaiting her

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moment to pounce out into space; beside her a rust-spotted tramp freighter was refueling for a routine hop to Luna, while another of Terra's Outer Dark Line, *Comet Forty-Three*, occupied lane four. The third lane was empty, its green-painted length a soothing eye-aid for the radium agents after Alpha Centauri's infernal brilliant yellow. Unconsciously, they both stared at the empty lane, their faces slack and their minds at peace.

"Good to be home," said D'Angeur after a long quiet. "I often think a man doesn't appreciate Terra until he's been all over the spaceways and seen a score or two of planets. Then he can settle down and look at green things and know what a blessing they are."

"Venus is green enough, I should think, even for you."

"If a man likes to live in a fluid-suit and beat off the comfort-women all day long. No, there's no place like home."

"You have just heard pearls of wisdom from an original philosopher," said Moleath satirically, "who will speak to you next week on 'How I Coin Clever Phrases.' Thank you, Mister D'Angeur."

"Moleath, look there," said the Frenchman suddenly, leaning forward. "In lane three. That's interesting."

"What is it, a Saturnian smoke-man?"

"No." They were watching a

small mist that was forming against the green. "I'll wager you five grains of prognarite that's a Martian coming in via single-trav."

"You're right! I wonder where he's been? I hear they can go anywhere at all in those damn things," said Moleath.

"I don't think we know the half of it. I've heard the weirdest rumors . . . Say, let's get him in here and talk to him. I never met one of their travelers."

"Sure, I'd like to. He's coalescing now."

The mist thickened, solidified, and turned into a small Martian encased in a flexible single-trav, the miraculous creation of long-ago scientists on the red planet. He unzipped it, stepped out, casually folded it up and strapped it into an insignificant package. Then he came pattering toward the drome, his sandaled feet swiftly flicking the surface of the lane in the quick nervous gait of the Martian peoples.

"They say those little guys can not only go on intergalactic trips in those flimsy envelopes, but can time-travel, too. They're supposed to be so powerful, the single-travs I mean, that only a handful of their men are licensed to use 'em. I never even heard of them till last year, but I'm sure they're a lot older than that."

"He's coming in," said Moleath. "Motion him over."

"Hi! Over here, *kanlore*," shouted D'Angeur, using the Martian term for friend. The little fellow skittered over. "Sit down, won't you?" He introduced himself and Moleath. The gray-clad Martian smiled and bobbed his head.

"I am Smith," said the outlander in Terrestrial. "Of the Martian Sunbound Museum of Intrastellar Knowledge. How do you do? I see by your pupil you've not been in long."

"Alpha Centauri, and hope to see it again—in a million light years or so. Your own pupils are wider than a trip across the continent would make them," said Moleath. "May one ask . . .?"

"Oh, yes. Mercury. A very interesting place indeed." The Martian grinned, and his four eyes, set into the four corners of his square little face, crinkled with amusement. "A fascinating stay. Twenty years."

"Twenty years on Mercury. Heaven preserve us!" murmured D'Angeur piously. "Give me even the mercury-water of Centaurus in preference to the fog-water of Mercury."

"My friend is French, and addicted to horrible puns. But twenty years!"

"A flick of the fingers." Smith, the Martian, gave both of his rubbery twelve-fingered hands a wave.

"To you, yes. To us—a tenth of our lives. We don't live two thousand years apiece, but a pal-

try two hundred." A wry smile took away any implication of jealousy there might have been in Moleath's speech.

"What were you doing there?" queried D'Angeur.

"Observing. It's my job," said Smith, whose actual Martian name was probably so full of clicks and fizzes as to be unpronounceable.

"By the way," said Moleath, as the waiter came sliding up with three more scarlet glasses, "you came in with one of those new single-travs, didn't you?"

"One of the ancient single-travs," corrected the Martian. "Mine is centuries old."

"They're new to us."

"Oh? Would you like to know about them, then?" asked Smith courteously. His four-eyed face, with the speech orifice in the center, expressed as well as it could a desire to be informative. "I've often thought it too bad that you chaps can't use them too."

"Why can't we?" asked D'Angeur.

"It's your brain waves. They would tear the travs to pieces, even if you could get them started, and there you would be, barreling along in interstellar space all by yourself whereas our own thought waves, being of a far different type from yours, are perfectly adapted to guide them without accident."

"Then they're not strictly mechanical?"

"Jove, Jupiter and jackrabbits! No," exclaimed Smith. "They're hardly mechanical at all."

"Then what's the force that drives them?"

"My brain. Our brains. Our thought impulses. When we travel between planets, for instance, we don't actually go via space, as you do in your ships, but via the dimension-wraps."

"But then why are your pupils distended, like our own always are after flight?" asked Moleath keenly.

"I don't know exactly. It seems to be a by-product of any sort of travel between the planets, whether by rocket or by single-trav. Even when you're teleported to Mars, as one or two of your men have been recently, you arrive with wide pupils. Funny," mused Smith, sipping the gim-liquor through a straw. "Don't ask me why, I'm merely an observer."

"Look here, *kanlore*," went on Moleath, leaning forward, "when you say you run these things by thought waves, d'you mean you just zip into them and *think* yourselves somewhere else, and there you are?"

"Oh, well, not quite that simple," said Smith. "Look here." He placed the folded trav on the table between them. It looked something like a plastic raincoat. "See those?" The Martian pointed to a circle of small dials and levers set into the thin material. "Those are in front of one; they

take care of speed, size, direction, and so on—but the motivating force behind them is here." He tapped his rubbery fingers against his quaint little head. "Without the peculiar type of waves my brain sets up, this is little more than a flexible tent of transparent plastic."

"Well, that is interesting," said D'Angaur. "*Zut alors*, as my ancestors were fond of exclaiming, and likewise *sacre bleu*. What do you mean by size?"

"The dial for size? Most important. Suppose I go to a planet or a land where the inhabitants are all four inches tall. Without this size adjustor I appear among them as an incredible monster. Suppose, for example, I go to Lilliput."

"Lilliput? Where's that?" asked the Frenchman.

"It's one land into which our friend Smith will never single-trav himself," said Moleath, laughing. "It was an imaginary island invented by Dean Swift some few centuries ago, and populated by infinitesimal pygmies."

"Precisely," said Smith. "Well, suppose I go to Lilliput—"

"Oh, but take a possible example, at least!" said D'Angaur. "Take that little planet in the Vernaluc galaxy, what's its name? Its inhabitants are only about a foot high. Take it."

"But the inhabitants of Lilliput," insisted the Martian pedantically, "are for the most part

under six inches. Now if I had not taken care to set this dial in such a manner as to shrink me to the average local size, then they would have called me Quinbus Flestrin, or the Man-Mountain, while I lived with them; whereas I was known simply as Hurgo Smith, or Lord Smith, the One with Four Eyes."

"Forgive me, but the astral voids have evidently affected my hearing . . . Did you say 'when I lived in Lilliput'?" asked Moleath sarcastically. The Martian nodded.

"I let it out, didn't I? Yes, I lived there. For about eight years. A very interesting place indeed."

"But there never was any such place as Lilliput!"

"Oh, but there was—there is. Since, of course, all times and dimensions exist coeternally, it was a simple matter to single-trav myself there."

"But Swift made it all up!" shouted Moleath, forgetting politeness. "He made it up out of whole cloth!"

"Certainly he did. But he believed in it, after a time—as so many authors come to believe in their own creations. And so it, of course exists."

"Oh, come," said Moleath weakly. "You're joking."

"Not at all," said Smith seriously. "There is the essential difference between the power of the rocket, the power of the time machine, and the power of the sin-

gle-trav. This little bundle," he tapped the plastic with a boneless finger, "while containing all the powers of the other two devices, adds the invaluable attribute of being capable of transporting one (if one is a Martian) into the most difficult dimensions of all—those formed by the power of the imagination. Let me give you a little lecture," he said, squirming nervously and staring into their doubtful faces. "What is the force behind all life, all inanimate objects, all the universe? It is thought. It is the incredible power of *mind*—never mind whose. Mine, yours, the Venusian comfort-women's, and above all whatever supreme force is running the whole shebang."

"Granted." said D'Angeur. "With reservations—granted."

"Oh, with no reservations, believe me. We have known the principle for aeons, and your race is coming to accept it too. You, perhaps unfortunately, are limited in your ability to use the waves, or cells, or impulses, or whatever you choose to term the untermable entities, that make up your minds. You can build incredible machines which it has never even occurred to us to build; you can conquer space with legions that are all but invincible; but you cannot venture into the realms of complex thought as we can. I mean no offense," he added hastily.

"None taken, sir. He's perfectly

right, Moleath," said the Frenchman.

"Yes, he is. Well, about the trav. Go on."

"It came to be known to our men of wisdom many ages back that the creations of man's spirit and imagination were in their way as permanent and solid as the creations of his hands. I use your Terrestrial word 'man' to signify any thinking being in the universe. When the trav was perfected, the first places our pioneers went were Mvrlxka and Ghkxlx."

"Gesundheit," said Moleath inaudibly.

"Those are the Martian—err, Fairyland and Heaven," said Smith.

"And they were there?"

"Surely. Too many Martian babies had believe in the first, and too many adult Martians in the second, to admit of their being anything but realities."

"Anything believed in the heart can be proven," said D'Angeur softly.

"Exactly. And exists, too, in dimensions as concrete and self-sufficient as the spaceport."

"But, great Aldebaran, look here!" burst out Moleath. "I grudgingly admit the possibility of your Fairyland, and your Heaven, and even of your Lilliput. A lot of children have believed in that one for hundreds of years, too. But what about just ordinary books? Take that one What's-his-name—Jefferlap—wrote last year,

about the place where everything was black and mauve and nobody sat still for more than two seconds. You mean to tell us..."

"No. That was a satire on our civilization," said D'Angeur. "I'm sure the man didn't believe in any such place and so, presto, no such place exists. No powerful thought-impulses to create it."

"That's right," said the Martian.

"But Lilliput was nothing but a satire."

"Which the children of Terra made their own," said Smith.

"And believed in. You have no notion what a lot of thought-waves a couple of hundred generations of kids can send out!"

"Where else have you been?" asked D'Angeur.

"Oh, a great many places. The Mercurian Hell, for one. It's really not a bad place. Most interesting."

"Mercury's a horrid enough place without the natives making up a worse one," growled Moleath. "Say, I wonder if there's a private Hell on Alpha Centauri?"

"With water that tastes like water," said his friend. "Where else were you, Smith?"

"The time before that I was with Hereward the Wake when he fought against the forces of William the Conqueror. A fascinating man, Hereward! You should time-travel back some day," said Smith. "Then before that, I spent years in Utopia."

"Sir Thomas More's Utopia?"

"Yes."

"But *he* never believed . . ."

"Oh yes he did," said the Martian a trifle smugly. "I know. I lived there. A very interesting place indeed. I found it, for example, quite charming to go into the street when it rained, rather than to go into the street when it rained."

"What'd happen if you set your simple trav to go someplace and it really *didn't* exist? Suppose you read of a place and decided to look it over and found that no one, not even its creator, believed in it at all? Where would you end up?"

"I don't know," said Smith slowly. "I might not leave the place I started from. Again, I might . . . I don't know. It's never happened."

"Look here, old chap," said Moleath, "you say you've been to a heaven or two."

"Yes. Including your American Indian's happy hunting grounds. A very interesting place indeed."

"Well, if they exist, do you think that implies that a fellow is going to go to his own particular heaven when he dies, if he really believes in it? If, say, there's a happy hunting grounds, why then, are all the defunct Indians there?"

"Upon that question," said the Martian primly, "I have no information whatever, and could certainly hazard no guess."

"But you claim to have been there."

"I was there fourteen years, and now I can probably shoot an arrow as well as any man living. I saw many millions of Indians. Whether they were the souls of the departed or simply inhabitants like the Lilliputians, I could not say. I am no theologian."

"Where else have you been?" asked D'Angeur. He was not sure he believed all this, but he found it fascinating.

"Oh, a great many places. Mercury was really off my beat. I have specialized, rather, in your Terrestrial legends and stories. The Fortune Isles; Campanella's City of the Sun; El Dorado; Mu; Cabet's Icaris; Plato's Republic; the Greece of Pan and the gods—they thought I was one of them, since I wasn't any sort of human being—I could tell you tales of the satyrs . . . yes. I found them all very interesting places indeed."

"Have you ever been to a place you couldn't designate as 'very interesting indeed'?" asked Moleath.

"Oh, no! I find everyplace has its points."

"Some time you must take in Alpha Centauri."

"I'm scheduled to go there after I visit Erewhon," said Smith.

"Aha, I have you!" shouted Moleath. "Erewhon, is nothing but Butler's anagram for Nowhere. By its name it belies its exist-

ence! You'll find yourself utterly nowhere."

"Names are labels and mean nothing in comparison with the force of thought," said the Martian calmly. "I shall be very interested in 'Erewhon'."

"And what do you do with all the information you gather on these places?" asked D'Angeur. "Do you write it up?"

"Yes, and submit it for the archives of the Sunbound Museum of Intrastellar Knowledge. It's my job. Some day we'll have data on every dimension and then—then we'll know."

"Know what?"

"All about every dimension," said Smith, grinning in the center of his square flat face.

"Robespierre, what do you think?" asked Moleath of his friend. "Is our *kanlore* here tugging at our collective legs, or is he admitting things no Martian ever admitted to us before?"

"We're not secretive you know," said Smith, interrupting. "It's just that we don't like being called liars any more than Terrestrians do, and how many earthmen would refrain from calling me a liar if I said I was going to Atlantis next Friday?"

"Are you going to Atlantis next Friday?"

"No. As a matter of fact my schedule's been messed up, and my time's my own for about five years," said the Martian. "I was just exampling."

"Well, it's all very astounding and I'm much obliged to you for telling us about it," said Moleath. He caught the Frenchman's eye and gave a swift wink. "I know where I'd go if I had five years and a single-trav at my disposal. If I had your thought-wavelength, that is."

"Where?" asked the Martian quickly.

"Why, I'd go to Marmalade!" "Marmalade?"

"Marmalade repeated Moleath emphatically. "The grandest country that ever was thought into existence in its own little dimension."

"I don't seem to remember Marmalade," said Smith in a puzzled tone. "Who invented it?"

"A fellow called—um—Thealom. Sebastian Q. Thealom. He wrote about it a couple of hundred years ago. Talk about your lands of cakes and honey! Marmalade has 'em all beat fifty ways from the jack."

"What was it like?" asked D'Angeur. His voice was suspicious.

"Why, it was all the glories of Greece and Rome poured into a mold and leavened with eternal sunshine and superb women and perfection of food and drink—salted with the glamor of Poictesme, and the mysteries of lost Atlantis—and topped with the absolute peace of mind of Shangri-La!"

"You left out the grandeur of Cathay," murmured D'Angeur.

"Marmalade," said Smith. "It has a romantic sound, hasn't it?"

"As romantic as the seacoast of Bohemia."

"Or as a piece of bread and jelly," said D'Angeur. "I never heard of it."

"It's an obscure volume, I suppose, 'The Happy Voyage To Marmalade,' but a fascinating one. You could tell as you read it that old Thealom believed every word of it."

"I had in mind," said the Martian, sipping at his gim, "to visit a while in the Mohammedan Paradise. But then a chap couldn't get the most out of it, unless he was prepared to stay at least six hundred years . . ."

"Why?" asked Moleath. "Oh, now I recall. Never mind."

"Do you think I'd be too anomalous in your Marmalade?" asked Smith eagerly. His face was alight now. "Most of the inhabitants of these utopian dreams are pretty tolerant, but once or twice I've been mistaken for the Devil himself. I am somewhat different from you fellows," he added, grinning. The earthmen looked at his fantastic face.

"Yes, you'd show up in the streets of Imperial Rome like a sun-blister on milady Cleopatra's nose . . . No, in Marmalade all the people are democratic to the verge of idiocy."

"Very well. I make up my mind quickly. Marmalade it is," said

Smith. He drained the last of the gim from his scarlet glass. "I'm much obliged to you. The least I can do is let you watch me leave this dimension." He rapidly unfolded the single-trav. "I slip inside, thus—I zip it up, thus—now can you hear me?"

"Perfectly."

"I set the size dial, so that no matter what the bigness or littleness of this projected destination, I shall be scaled to size automatically.

"I set the speed dial to zero, since I am on Terra and this country will lie comparatively close . . . Now I adjust the warper, the regular whisk and the extra-teratism whisk, the screener and the atmosphereith . . . Now I am ready. It remains to concentrate my thought-impulses on Marmalade. I am about to begin. Goodbye, gentlemen."

"But, really, I never—" began D'Angeur. Moleath pinched his arm rudely.

"Shut up!"

The Martian frowned, his quartet of eyebrows coming down in four intense arcs of concentration. There was a very faint splutter, like a candlewick burning out in its own grease, and he was gone. The space where he had stood in his single-trav was vacant.

"Well, I'm damned," said D'Angeur. "He went to Marmalade."

"If he did," said Moleath, throwing himself down into the

soft padded cushions of the chair with a shriek of laughter, "If he did, he'll be solar-hermit lonely!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Robespierre, my dear old serious frog, he sat here for one mortal hour pulling your leg till I thought it'd come off—so I just pulled his!" He howled with mirth. "Now he's gone away, probably to Mars or Venus, thinking he's fooled us blind—while all the time I knew he couldn't go to Marmalade, since I made it up on the spur of the moment. Sebastian Q. Thealom! Thealom's an anagram of Moleath. There's no such place as Marmalade in legend or literature. Any more than there are dimensions containing Erewhon, and Utopia and Cockaigne."

"But I think he was telling the truth," objected D'Angeur.

"Oh, Robespierre! Go atomize your ears. I admit that single-trav of his is a beaut of a space-eater, and maybe even a time-machine in addition, but when it comes to visitin' imaginary islands and made-up cities, oh, really! You know those Martians are the greatest jokers in the system."

"I grant you that. But I believe Smitty was telling the truth, unvarnished and complete; and if he was, and he finds out you whooped him off on the trail of a wild goose, I shudder to think of what a comeback jest he may think up for you!"

"I'm equal to any four-orbed rubber-boned bag o' nerves," said Moleath. "I like the little guy, but if he tries a topper on me after filling me full of all that unadulterated space-juice, I'll just hold him by his topknot in the flame of a comet till he turns green!"

"Still: imagine he was telling the literal truth for a moment; then where is he now? In Marmalade?"

"He can't be. For even if his yarn was straight, how can Marmalade exist if I, its creator, don't believe in it?"

"But if Smith does?"

"He doesn't know enough details to really believe. No, if his story was fact, then he's probably floating somewhere between here and Luna, looking wildly for a spaceport."

"I wouldn't want to see him hurt as a result—"

"Neither would I," said Moleath soberly. "But, greased rocket jets, he won't be! If it's not there, he'll come back. Those travs are pretty well foolproof, I imagine."

"Then he'll come back and play a gag on you that'll crisp your hair worse than the water on Alpha Centauri," said D'Angeur. "You know the four-eyed fellows have the most violent senses of humor in the universe for all they're so little and polite."

"Oh, well, he was only having himself a time foxing us, anyway," said Moleath with assur-

ance. "He's on his path to Venus, I'll bet, laughing sockets!"

When the single-trav began to shiver ever so slightly, as its preliminary to halting in the new dimension, Smith the Martian touched the tiny lever which permitted him to hover momentarily into Marmalade.

Utter and unrelieved blackness greeted his stare.

He grinned in the peculiar manner of his race when among their own kind or alone: his four eyes slanting inward toward the speech orifice in a rather horrifying manner. Something told him it was not night in Marmalade . . .

He had looked briefly into Mo-leath's mind when they first met, through the Terrestrial's subconscious, and had found there no evil guile. He knew the man would never have sent him deliberately on a dangerous journey, so with only the shortest of halts he swung the single-trav into action again. Motivated by the curious force-rays that emanated from his brain, it plunged through the dimension barriers and came to rest in the absolute darkness.

"Mens aequa in arduis," said the Martian to himself in Latin: the old Stoic philosophy, "retain an even mind in difficulties."

The atmospheric tester, the atmospherith, showed the surrounding "air" to be a thin liquid; he noted the various ele-

ments making up this liquid, and with his rubber fingers he did certain things to his metabolism mechanism, unzipping his gray shirt for the purpose. The subdued glow of the single-trav dials was his only light. Then he slipped from the plastic envelope and walked out into Marmalade. The odd watery liquid flowed through his system, and his metabolism mechanism began to absorb the elements he could not use and discard them, while he breathed freely and comfortably.

For a moment he made no move to bring light to Marmalade. He was content to stand in the jet darkness and smile quietly to himself. There was no noise other than an almost inaudible throbbing, something like a very distant surf upon incredible uncharted shores of mystery.

At last he raised a hand to the metal crown-like affair that all Martians wore tilted back on their craniums, and switched on the powerful cold floodlight in the center. Instantly the entire world of Marmalade was vivid with day.

The strange calm of this uninhabited land pleased Smith; already he could feel his nervous tension smoothing out, and he said to himself that perhaps nowhere else would he find such quiet, such freedom to rest and cogitate; an earthman would have gone mad in such a landscape, but Smith knew he could live there indefinitely without grow-

ing either impatient or weary. In the background, invisible, the beating surf rolled on against the unknown shore and Smith looked about him and smiled.

He stood on a little hill, a hill that appeared on the horizon far away, rolled toward him with a smooth and unvarying width of what appeared to be about eighty feet—if the martian were still five feet tall. It slid beneath his feet and receded into the opposite distance, like a long twisting roll of grayish dough. On either side of this hill ran a deep valley, funnel-shaped, and then came another identical hill, and so on, and on, and on . . .

It was as though he had been shrunk to the size of a Lunar micrognat, Smith thought and then been dropped onto a strand of spaghetti; and this strand was only one of many hundreds of similar strands, laid side by side, stretching to eternity.

Everywhere he looked about him rose strange irregular growths, some thin as matchwood, others thick as oak trees; leafless, branching, shooting madly hither and yon. They sprang from the gray soil and ended, not in space, but in the roof of this strange world of Mar-malade. They were like fantastic upright pillars holding up the "sky"—a mucous-slick sky as gray and incredible as the soil itself.

The soil was not, however, a solid gray. All about, just beneath the surface, darted little networks of red—like streams of blood flowing everywhere, everywhere, to nourish this unbelievable land.

"Well, well," said Smith aloud. "I imagined that was it. He played me a joke, did he? A good one too! Let me see." He thrust out a finger at the hill on which he stood.

"This is a sulcus. The valleys are gyri. Those three-things are the trabeculae, then; and I am standing on the piamater, beneath this roof of the subarachnoid cavity of—"

"I wish he'd come back, that's all," said D'Angeur. "I don't feel right about it. What if that trav of his just dumps him into a void someplace, or disintegrates? How do we know what it might do?"

"Oh, come," said Moleath jovially. "He's all right. It couldn't take him anywhere dangerous, because—well, because in the first place he was kiddin' us all along, and in the second place this Mar-malade is nothing but a figment of my mind. So what's the harm?"

"Harm enough if he comes back with a Martian joke all cooked up, old friend. Their humor tends to be pretty violently physical."

"Oh, they love a joke on themselves. And he can't have come to harm, Robespierre. I tell you Mar-malade exists only in—"

"Moleath's brain!" finished the Martian, chuckling. "Here I am on a sulcus, which is about half an inch wide, so I suppose I'm no more than one thirty-second of an inch high . . . And those trees, the arachnoid trabeculae, are in reality fibrous filaments about as thick as nylon thread . . . Hmmm! Well!" he took out a pack of Venusian under-liquid cigarettes and put one in his speech orifice. "If he will send me here, by Jove and by jackrabbits, he must stand a little heat!" He lit a magnesium-fylor superheat match, which burned up brightly even in the powerful glow of his floodlight, and lit his cigarette with a thoughtful smile.

"Ouch!" said Moleath suddenly.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, I've got a queer sharp little pain in my head. Right up here on top."

"You're getting too old for the spaceways," said D'Angeur, shaking his head in mock sadness. "These long trips are too much for you."

"Ouch! It's like a flame in my skull!" said Moleath, ignoring the Frenchman's humor. "Like a

blasted little flame, right up on top!"

"Yes," said Smith aloud. "I like it here. It's quiet, and safe, and there'll be nobody to bother me with interruptions. I think I'll stay here for the whole five-year term." He picked up the collapsed single-trav and thrust a hand into its transparent insides. "Let's see, I'll have to build myself a little cottage first. Shovel, please," he said into one of the dials, which had a tiny hole in it. "And in an hour or two, planks. Ah, thank you." A razor-edged spade had appeared in the trav. He brought it out.

"First I'll have to dig a foundation," he went on thoughtfully. "Not too deep—let's see, how thick is this layer? Thick enough to let me dig a nice hole without serious damage, I'm sure. Might be somewhat painful to his nervous system, but then—Marmalade eh?" Complaisantly humming a Martian tune, he began to dig himself the foundation of a cottage here in this curious, solid-spongy, red-shot gray soil.

The End

Don't Miss

RON GOULART'S GREAT NOVELET The Housebreakers

IN THE NOV FANTASTIC



AMAZING STORIES

THE CHILDRENS ROOM

RAYMOND F. JONES

Illustrated by ROD RUTH

One day if that boy of yours brings home a "library book" that you can read but your wife can't—though it could well be the other way around—because it's written in a language like something yet seen on this Earth, then both of you had better hold on tight, for—as the author of "Fifty Million Monkeys" and Renaissance makes poignantly clear—you may have to learn the hard way that if his I.Q. is right, the future might have more say than you about your own son.



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THE CHILDREN'S ROOM

67

BILL Starbrook sat down carefully in his battered soup-and-fish and picked up the latest *Journal of Physics*. There had been time to read only the first three pages of Sanderson's article on nuclear emissions before he and Rose had gone off to what she euphemistically termed "an evening's entertainment." Now, at two o'clock in the morning, he tried to shake from his head the brain fog induced by the foul air and worse liquor of the cabaret.

Finally he gave it up. It was useless to try to keep up on his science. But that was the price to be paid for being Chief Engineer of an outfit like Bradford Electronics. Commerce before research, and the customer's gin is always the best.

But his day was coming. He was nearly ready to break loose as an independent consultant.

As he moved to lay the *Journal* down he glanced at the spot on the end table at which it was aimed. There was a new book there, one he hadn't seen before. He dropped the *Journal* into the magazine rack and picked up the unfamiliar book. One of young Walt's. The kid was always bringing in strange volumes from the university and the public libraries. His 240 I.Q. mind was as inquisitive as a pup's. He would read anything he could get his hands on.

The present volume looked like something out of an ancient law

or medical library to judge by the cover. Walt read as many curdling comics as the average ten-year-old in the neighborhood, but he read voraciously also of everything else from *Plutarch's Lives* to the *Journal of Physics*.

Starbrook was somewhat puzzled to find that the ponderous looking tome in his hands was nothing but a fairy tale.

He thumbed through it curiously. There was no accounting for the swift, piercing inquiry of the boy's mind. It was perhaps no more inconsistent that he should find entertainment in a fairy story than that he should find intellectual pleasure in atomic theory. All this while his companions confined themselves to such moderations as comic books and baseball.

The words of the story caught Starbrook's eye. He found himself scanning the sentences, following their meaning. A strange, tantalizing quality escaped him at first, then became plain as he went along. It was the fact that almost every word had a double semantic content. It was like reading two stories simultaneously. He marvelled at the skill that had been required to construct such a tale.

The secondary, or theme story, as he thought of it, held him entranced. It was a curious tale about a group of men different in mental and physical attributes from their fellows. They were sad and lonely because they were isolated from each other and because

the human beings with whom they associated did not understand them. Then, magically, there appeared a book that went throughout the Earth and led them to each other and through a door into a place where they lived happily ever after.

A curious tale, it was as if the shadow of a strange and mysterious meaning lay hidden there just beyond the grasp of his imagination. He revised his first opinion. It was the kind of thing that would appeal to Walt, all right.

Then, suddenly, Starbrook awoke to the fact that the time was four-thirty and he could snatch scarcely two hours' sleep before getting down to the labs.

At six o'clock, however, he roused blearily at the sound of movement within the bedroom. Rose was getting dressed.

"What's the big idea?" he said.

"Shh, darling. Go back to sleep. I'll call you in an hour. Walt's been coughing for the last hour. I'm going in to see him. If he has a cold, he can't go to school this morning."

Starbrook shook his head fiercely to try to clear it. He knew it was useless to try to sleep more now. It would only make him more dopest at work. He glanced groggily at the clock and stumbled into Walt's room.

The boy was smothering a cough. He grinned as the spasms ended. "I'm the victim of a filterable virus, Dad. I didn't mean

for my coughing to wake you."

Starbrook sat down on the edge of the bed. "Better stay home today and not let the bugs get any bigger hold on you."

"I guess so, but gee—I've got a library book due today and they're awfully strict. Maybe you'd take it back for me?"

"Sure. Where does it go? What book is it?"

"It's on the table in the living room. It's from the Children's Room of the University Library."

"That odd fairy tale book? I looked at it last night. I didn't know they had any such books at the University."

"I didn't either until a month ago. They've got some swell books there. It seems like you go along and think you've just been reading a swell story, and all of a sudden you find it's just been teaching you something. Like putting candy on a pill. I sure wish they'd do it that way in school."

Starbrook laughed. "Sounds like a good system. I'll have to have a look into some more of these books they have there."

"I hope you do," said Walt quietly.

"I suppose Miss Perkins is responsible for them. She's always up on the latest stuff to improve the mind of man and beast."

Bill Starbrook was well known around the campus of Hedeman University. He frequented the excellent research library there and had arranged for Walt's special

use of the books there, although he was sure that Miss Perkins, the librarian, regarded them both as unconventional interlopers who had no place on a dignified campus.

Pausing on the way to work to return the book, Starbrook found Miss Perkins alone at the desk. He unlocked his brief case and took out Walt's book.

"Good morning, Miss Perkins. I wonder if you'd see that this gets to the Children's Room for me? It's due today and Walt's sick."

Miss Perkins smiled a good morning, then frowned. "The Children's Room? We have no children's department."

She picked up the book and examined its title page and library number. She frowned even more darkly. "You must be mistaken. This doesn't even make sense. It isn't one of our books."

Starbrook grunted in irritation. "I was sure Walt said he got it here."

"It must be from the public library, though I'm sure I don't understand the markings. What is it? Something mathematical?"

Starbrook looked at her and mentally counted to ten. He was in no mood for jokes this morning. He said sweetly, "It's just some fairy tales my boy has been reading."

He left before he observed Miss Perkins' severely pursed lips.

As he turned away, the incident

hung on in his mind with irritating persistence. He knew he hadn't been so dopey that morning that he hadn't heard Walt correctly. He was certain the boy had said the Children's Room at the University Library.

Then, as he was almost to the door, he glanced to the left and swore softly. There, over a doorway, was the designation: Children's Room.

What was Miss Perkins trying to pull on him? he wondered. Mathematics—!

He wondered why he hadn't noticed this room before, but he had always dashed through in such a hurry. It could easily escape notice, hidden as it was in a shallow alcove.

The room wasn't very large. Seated at tables were about a dozen children ranging in ages from about eight to fourteen. The librarian at the desk was little and wrinkled. A quality of tremendous age like an aura about her, defied description, but her blue eyes were sharp and young.

She seemed startled by his appearance. "You haven't been here before!"

Starbrook liked her at once. There was none of Miss Perkins' sourness which he had come to associate with all librarians.

He smiled, "No. My son, Walt, checked this out. He is sick today, so he asked me to bring it in."

"Were you—have you read any,

understood any of this book?

Starbrook was puzzled by her alarm and amazement at his appearance. "Yes," he said. "It's quite an interesting book. I haven't kept up very well with progress in children's literature."

The little old librarian exclaimed, "This is *so* unusual. I wonder what I ought to—"

Starbrook had about reached the end of his endurance for the day. It was twenty minutes to nine—twenty minutes until he had to meet all his section chiefs for weekly conference.

"I must go now," he said. "If you will just check this book in for my boy—"

The librarian seemed to reach some decision about a matter beyond his comprehension. She lost her helpless expression and smiled gently. "Of course. And would you take this next volume in the series he is reading? Also, I wonder if you would do us the favor of taking a couple of other volumes and glancing over them critically yourself. We have some rather radically different works here, and we're anxious to have adult criticism on them."

Starbrook's irritation lessened before her smile and he nodded. "I'll be glad to."

The day passed with all the irritations and commotions that might be expected the day after such a night before as Starbrook had experienced. He was at least relieved to find that it had result-

ed in clinching the purchase of the Cromwell patents, which had been the object of last night's entertainment.

He was tired when he finally reached home again after such a day, but not too tired to put on a cheery smile for Walt as he told Rose to wait dinner a few minutes. He took the new book and went into Walt's bedroom.

Walt's eyes lighted. "Gee, Dad, I thought you'd never come! You brought me another book! Maybe I could talk you into reading to me."

"Sure. There's nothing I'd like better. The librarian even asked me to take a couple for myself. We'll read right after dinner. O.K.?"

"Sure. I'm glad you saw Miss Edythe. She's a nice old lady, isn't she? She shows me just which books to read so that I won't get mixed up on them."

"Are you supposed to read them in a certain order?"

"Yes. I picked up some out of order one day and they looked like a foreign language. I have to read the first ones to understand the harder ones. I don't know why, but that's the way it is."

After dinner, Starbrook went back and opened the new volume that Miss Edythe had sent for Walt.

"You really can read this stuff, all right?" said Walt.

"Sure, why?"

"Well, you haven't read the first

books yet, and I just wondered," Walt said evasively.

Starbrook took up the reading. The story was something of a continuation of what he had read the previous night, the story of the "different" men. In long detail it told how the first man learned that he was different, and how he finally located a few others of his kind. Together, they prepared the magic book and sent it on its way around the world to gather all the rest.

The darkness of early autumn slowly filled the room, and the words grew dim on the pages before Starbrook. But within his brain it was as if a glowing, expanding illumination were present. The story that had been secondary in the previous book was now the primary, as he termed them to himself. And the secondary story of this book was a devastating, unbelievable revelation.

"You are one of the 'different' men," its unspoken, intangible message shouted within his brain, "and this is the magic book. Follow where it leads and you shall find the haven that has been prepared for all of us."

He slammed the book shut abruptly as the darkness became too great to see the words any longer, but he could not still that persistent message in his brain.

The white face of Walt lying against the pillow was hardly visible. "Don't stop," the boy said.

"Turn on the light and let's go on."

"Walt—" Starbrook hesitated. He didn't quite know how to say it. "What does this mean to you? Do you find any symbolism in it besides the actual story?"

"Sure. It says that we're a different kind of people from most others. It's going to show us how to get to a place where there are others of our kind. We couldn't read it if that weren't so. That's why I'm so glad you can read it. You're one of us, too."

Starbrook was glad the darkness hid his face and his eyes. "How do you know that?"

"Miss Edythe told me that others wouldn't believe that there were ordinary words in these books. She said not to show them to anyone for that reason. I found out she was right."

Disappointment clouded Walt's eyes. "Mom picked up one of the books one day, and she seemed almost afraid of it. I told her then that it was algebra. She didn't know the difference, but still seemed afraid. I left it for you on purpose—"

Starbrook had an average amount of imagination for an engineer, but it staggered before the implications of all this. He told himself it was only an extraordinary realism in the story of the "different" men and their magic book. It was fantastic to believe the men and the book had any counterpart in actuality.

Yet in his mind there was a supreme, undeniable knowledge that could not be denied. Before it, his doubts and name calling were the taunts of a little boy before an impossible, white fairyland.

The book existed.

This was it.

The "different" men were real. He was one of them—he and Walt belonged to that mysterious clan.

But who were they? What did this unanswerable knowledge imply?

"I have to do a little work downstairs," Starbrook said. "If you aren't asleep, I'll come up later and read some more."

He went into the living room and opened the first of the two books that Miss Edythe had asked him to look over.

He was surprised to find that these weren't as easy to read as the ones Walt had. The very language was somehow less comprehensible. At once he knew that *these* were not children's books—or were they? Books for the children who had come up through the gradual orientation process of the more elementary volumes?

There was no pretense of a story. The book opened at once with an abstruse exposition on the principles of biology, heredity, and radiation. It was hard going, but as he continued he seemed to grow in ability to grasp the words and principles. But he

tried in vain to imagine the eight-year-olds he had seen in the Children's Room grasping the substance of this work!

Rose came in to protest his staying up, but he refused to quit. His mind was leaping across gigantic peaks and crags of the magnificent exposition that lay before him. At midnight he put the book down, completed, dimly realizing that he had read and absorbed a work that should have required weeks.

But what was the purpose of it all? Why were such books in a children's department of a library? He still could not credit the insistent, semantic implications of the fairy story that he and Walt were of the "different" men. As yet, there was no explanation of the difference, and the mysterious destination of all these men.

And then the answer came swiftly and like a sudden burst of flame before his eyes. He opened the second of the two volumes which he had not been able to comprehend before. Its words were plain now and addressed directly to the reader.

"You can easily comprehend, now, that you are a mutant."

He stared at the words, trying to shed their meaning from his mind, but they stayed, and he knew the truth of them.

"You have come far enough to understand what that means," the book went on. "You are aware of

the extraterrestrial radiations which are continually producing mutations, and you understand some of the processes by which they are formed. It is not difficult, therefore, for you to understand that you are one of the many thousands of the 'different' men, the mutants who throng the Earth, scarcely knowing that they differ from their fellows in any matter."

Starbrook looked up. It would be easy to admit the truth of this with regard to Walt. With an I.Q. of 240 at the last test—

But Bill Starbrook—what could there be about him to indicate a mutation? He was a reasonably good engineer—but no better than a couple of million other guys. He possessed no unusual marks of mind or body.

"Thousands of mutations occur every month," he read on. "Most of them are lethal because they are of no advantage to the individual or to the race. But over a period of time there are also unknown thousands of beneficial mutations, most of which are also eventually lost.

"They are lost to the race through accident, improper mating or no mating at all. They are lost in many instances to the individual because the differences which they impose render him more or less misfit in social aggregations. There are, of course, numerous other instances in which desirable mutations pro-

duce a more intelligent, more enduring, completely superior individual, *who is never recognized by himself or his associates as a mutant*. His characteristics may be passed on for a few generations, but unless combined in proper matings they may become recessive and lost.

"In a time far distant from your own, the human race is in competition with another major race in the galaxy who are out-evolving mankind. In order to maintain not only the superiority which the human race has gained, but its very existence, it is necessary that the natural processes of evolution be speeded. Wasteful and ghastly experiments have proved the impossibility of doing this by artificial means. Only through natural processes which cannot be duplicated at will can evolution proceed in an effective manner. But nature, in her waste of precious mutations throughout the ages, is herself responsible for man's dire position in this future day.

"Our purpose, then, is to accelerate the evolutionary rate of the human race by salvaging the beneficial mutations which have been wasted through the ages.

"You who have come this far with us have a duty now, a duty to join us, to bring your mutated characteristics before the race for the benefit of all."

Starbrook was forced to halt. It was too vast, too foreign for his

mind or imagination. He was just Bill Starbrook, Chief Engineer at Bradford Electronics. It just wasn't in the cards for him to be out of the ages, pleading with him to come to some unnamed place for the good of the race.

He laughed shortly. Children's Room! Someone had certainly succeeded in producing the most fantastic, incredible fairy tales of all time. Almost had him believing for a moment that he was a mutant! He'd have to tell Miss Edythe that the books were realistic of nothing else.

He strolled out onto the porch. In the clear, cold night the stars looked near. A race had to utilize its mutants, or be outmoded in the contest for evolutionary perfection, he thought. He wondered what the ultimate product of human evolution would be. No doubt it would differ from man as man differed from the anthropoids and reptiles before him.

His eyes on the stars, he thought, were there others spawning races out there somewhere in their infancy, who would eventually challenge man and threaten to sweep him aside in the backwash of hopeless evolutionary superiority?

He brushed aside the maddening thought. There was one way to settle this once and for all. He could see the lights on in the house of Professor Martin, a block down the street on the other side. Martin was head of the ancient

languages department at the University, and sometimes they played gin rummy together.

Starbrook heaved into his topcoat and quietly left the house with one of the volumes under his arm.

Professor Martin was a big man with a bushy beard. He always reminded Starbrook of one of the ancient Greeks whose language he taught.

He greeted Starbrook with a welcoming roar. "Come in, Bill! I was just hoping somebody would come in for a good game of poker or gin. My wife went home for a week and I've been as lonely as a hibernating bear with insomnia."

Starbrook entered and removed his coat. "I can't stay. I just wanted to show you something and get your opinion on it. See what you make of this."

Starbrook opened the last volume that he had been reading. Its potent message leaped out to him from every character and word, but he turned his eyes carefully to Martin.

The Professor scowled. "Where'd you get this? Certainly these characters are like nothing I've ever seen, and I think I've seen them all."

Starbrook sighed. "I was hoping perhaps that you could read it and tell me what it is. It's—it's something I just picked up in a second-hand store in town. Probably some crazy lingo, some-

thing like that Esperanto of a few years ago, only worse."

Professor Martin shook his head. "Possibly. Certainly it isn't recognizable to me. Would you mind my keeping this for a while?"

"Well—perhaps later. I've already promised it to another friend right away. That's why I came over even though it's so late."

"Oh, that's quite all right! I'm glad to have some company. It's lonely here, you know—"

When Starbrook finally got out under the night sky again, the full force of the knowledge hit him like a blow.

I'm a mutant, he thought. Walt is a mutant. If we weren't we couldn't read these unknown characters as if they were plain English, while Martin and others find them unintelligible. And that must mean that all the rest of it is true, too.

And yet, there was still no meaning to it. This talk of a distant time, and a strange place of meeting for mutants out of all the ages—

That little old librarian, Miss Edythe, was evidently the key to the whole business. She knew the source of the books. She could tell him what it was about.

Then abruptly he remembered something he had not thought of during the evening. Miss Perkins' words: "We have no Children's Department!"

Starbrook was waiting at the outer entrance the following morning when the library building was opened by Miss Perkins herself. She recognized Starbrook and smiled bleakly.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Miss Perkins."

He passed on into the foyer and turned in the direction of the Children's Room. Through the open door he could see Miss Edythe already at her desk. And that was curious, since the library had just been opened. He glanced back as Miss Perkins passed on her way into the main library office. She looked at him—and at the door of the Children's Room as if nothing were there!

It gave Starbrook a sudden feeling of peculiar dread. He hurried in and found numerous children sitting about the tables in the room. He wondered how they had got in there.

"Good morning, Mr. Starbrook," said Miss Edythe. "I was hoping we'd see you this morning. Did you get time to glance over the books I asked for an opinion on?"

"Yes, I read them completely."

"That's fine. What do you think of what you read?"

"Miss Edythe—have you read these books? Do you know what is in them?"

"Why, surely. I've read every book in here quite carefully. It's been my life's work."

"Then what is the explana-

tion for—for all of this?"

The little old lady looked at him soberly out of her bright blue eyes, then moved from the chair on which she sat before the checking desk.

"Please come into the office," she said.

Starbrook followed her. She closed the door of the small room and sat down, bidding him to have a chair opposite.

"Yours is quite the most difficult case that has ever come to my attention," she began hesitantly. "In five hundred years there has been only one adult who appeared as suitable material for our colony. You will excuse me if I seem to oversimplify things because I am used to speaking with children—children, however, generally with an intelligence quotient of above 220, so that perhaps we can understand each other well enough after all.

"You recall, in the second of the books I gave you, the challenge to you as a mutant—"

"That's what I came to ask about! The whole business is so unbelievable, but I checked on the books. They couldn't be read by one of the University language professors."

"That should contribute considerably to your conviction of the truth of what you have read, then," said Miss Edythe.

"You mean there is actually a group of mutants somewhere who have been gathered to—to save

the human race from an enemy?"

"We hardly like to speak of it so melodramatically—but that is essentially our purpose. We're working to maintain the superiority of the human race in the face of an evolutionary lag from which we suffer. If we do not maintain that superiority it will certainly result in our eventual extinction. There are of course probabilities which have been worked out by our scientists, who understand such things. Sufficient for the moment is the fact that we are gathering out the mutants of all the ages of man's history in order to accelerate human evolution. By the proper utilization of these mutants we intend to out-evolve, outstep our competitors in the galaxy who threaten our supremacy and our existence.

"I cannot be aware of your past concept of mutants. With the children it is easy because they learn from the beginning the true character of mutations, the fact that a small variation in the gene for some characteristic may produce an individual with changes from the norm of his race, and highly advantageous both to himself and to the race. Mutations, however, are generally of such a minor character that their possessor is unaware of the variation. This is one important fact to remember in connection with our work.

"Unless, however, we can be-

come aware of these valuable mutations and utilize them, we are going to be left behind in the backwater of evolution much as the great apes were when man appeared."

Starbrook stared dumbly, trying to comprehend.

"A group of us long ago set out to preserve the useful mutants of the race from the earliest beginnings. We have many methods of accomplishing this. This library is one of the most effective. We have devised a language, in which our books are printed, which is intelligible only to mutants. There is a certain brain characteristic which might be termed mutant-linked, which makes this possible. That is, when any kind of gene variation occurs, there is also an inevitable variation of another gene at a specific locus which makes the brain receptive to a good many other stimuli, most of which you have never been aware of because the stimuli have not been presented. This language is one such stimulus. Another ability your mutation gives you is that of entering the room here."

"Why, I just walked in!" exclaimed Starbrook.

Miss Edythe smiled. "Yes, of course. But haven't you wondered why no others also walk in, why it is that only the mutants enter?"

"Why—yes, but—"

"This inscription, 'Children's

Room,' above the doorway appears to non-mutants as only a portion of the decorative design of the library building. You read it because it is in the mutation language. In addition, there is a complex pattern on the floor in front of the doorway, which marks a pathway for you to follow into the room. It is a path which no one would possibly chance upon, but your mutated senses follow it instinctively. To others, there is simply no doorway, no Children's Room at all."

"But what is the nature of my main mutation?" Starbrook demanded.

"That will have to be determined by proper examination. And there's one final warning I must make. Don't expect too much. The disappointments among us mutants are great. For example, in my own case the mutation was that of longevity. I am something over nine hundred years old—"

"Nine hun—!"

Miss Edythe nodded. "Yes. And combined with my particular mutation is a linked sterility factor. As I say, the disappointments among our group are great."

Her ancient eyes seemed suddenly to be peering down the ages, and Starbrook thought afterward that it was that moment of looking into those strong eyes that had seen so many alien centuries that did most to convince him of the truth of the entire matter.

"What am I to do?" he said at last.

"You will join us?"

"My son, Walt, too?"

"He has much to learn yet before we can present the entire plan to him."

"It's difficult to answer your question," said Starbrook. "I just don't know—"

"It's hardly more than moving to a strange city," said Miss Edythe, "except that your neighbors and associates will be from all ages and locales of time and space. In a way you will find it highly invigorating. Of course, there are ties that must be severed, friends, your wife—It is difficult that you are an adult!"

Rose!

For the first time he took full cognizance of the problem this created with respect to his marriage. Subconsciously, he supposed that she would share in whatever change was involved. If leaving Rose were one condition of joining the mutants, he was certain that they could well do without his contribution in the future as they had evidently done in the past.

But what of the children? he thought suddenly. Did it mean that they were to leave—?

There was a new cold tightness within him as he said, "Could I have the examination to determine what I'm good for, before I decide the matter?"

"Yes, it can be arranged im-

mediately. Please follow me."

They left by another door that led into a corridor which Starbrook knew was no part of the library building of Hedeman University. As they crossed it, he got a glimpse through a broad window and gasped audibly. The scene was one of green rolling hills dotted with small clusters of white buildings, a valley of serenity and life instead of the idiotic cluster of masonry that formed the cities of his own age.

His guide allowed no time to ponder the scene. She led him through the door across the hall. Inside he found himself in the midst of a roomful of unfamiliar looking equipment. A young, professional looking man greeted him with a smile.

"Doctor Rogers," said Miss Edythe in introduction. "He will conduct the examination. He knows about you. Come back to my office when you are through."

She left then, and Rogers indicated a chair. "It's a pleasure to have a full grown individual to talk to for a change," he said amiably. "Sometimes those pre-adolescent brats with I.Q.s of 250 and 300 are just a little too smart for their pants. I was one of them so I should know. Now, if you'll just lie back here on this table—"

Starbrook struggled desperately to hold to the fragments of his mind that constituted Bill Star-

brook, Chief Engineer of Bradford Electronics. That was all that was real. This world of fantastic Miss Edythe who was nine hundred years old, and the window that looked out upon a green valley where Hedeman should have been were only parts of a nightmare of being examined for possible useful mutations to aid the human race in its attempts to hurdle the laws of evolution.

He endured the long hours of the examination by repeating this fancy over and over again. Then, at last, Doctor Rogers announced that he was through.

Starbrook faced him across a desk. Before the doctor was a mass of records and charts, the accumulations of the tests.

"I have here your complete chromosome map," he said slowly.

"What mutations do I have that I can contribute to the advancement of man's evolution?"

There was a moment's hesitation, then Rogers looked up from the charts. "I may as well give it to you straight. The answer is: none. Absolutely none."

For a moment Starbrook sat stunned. During the past hours he had built up a vast mental structure on the premise that he was needed in assisting humanity to reach the heights. He had fought through the battle of deciding what sacrifices it would be worth. Now—

"None—?" I don't understand.

"Miss Edythe told me—The mutation language—"

"Your case is most unusual. The total of your mutations consists only of the sensory characteristics by which you were able to read our mutation language, and find your way into the Children's Room. I don't recall a single instance previously where this mutation was not linked with some other. It is somewhat interesting from a purely biological viewpoint, particularly in view of the fact that you are the father of Walt. Practically, however, your mutation has no value whatever."

Starbrook laughed then, his voice unable to disguise his disappointment and a vague shame. "So I am no use to you after all? I have nothing that is of use to my race?"

Rogers looked at him intently. "Don't emphasize the significance of this," he warned. "It means nothing whatever to you as an individual. You must realize that only one out of every few hundred human beings has any detectable mutation. Only one out of many thousands of mutations is of real value to the race.

"We are able to eliminate the children who are of no value to us without revealing what it's all about. Your case has been obviously different."

"Of course," said Starbrook. "Don't misunderstand me. I'm

not going to be bitter about this. I had no right to expect anything out of it. I suppose I've always been sort of an idealist, hoping to do something to lift men up, and all that sort of thing. I guess somewhere my subconscious must have grabbed hold of this pretty hard and seen in it a chance to realize those idealisms. But, anyway, what about my son, Walt?"

"We *must* have Walt. We absolutely must. His mutations appear to be the apex of endless unknown processes of nature, culminating in potentialities that will make him one of the most valuable members of our mutants colony. His life will change the race for generations to come."

"He doesn't know all this yet?"

"No. Even with his high understanding it must be fed to him slowly because he is a child. But he is being educated by the books to the point where he can be given full knowledge of his potentialities and our requirements."

"But what of his relationship to us! I'm not yet convinced of the urgency of this crisis you've spoken vaguely of—not sufficiently to make me ready to allow my son to begin a new life here with perhaps infrequent contact with us."

"Once he comes here and begins his work," said Rogers incisively, "there will be *no* further contact with you."

Starbrook stared in disbelief. "You mean you expect us to give you our son as completely as if he were dead?"

"Watch your semantic extensions," Rogers said dryly. "I doubt that anything could convince a member of this age of the urgency of our problem, but in your case I'd like to try, for several reasons.

"Imagine, if you will, two planets on which life had simultaneous beginnings and similar forms of development. On one of these, however, the natural rate of mutant occurrence and consequent evolution is several times that of the other, so that by the time man—so-called modern man—appears on one, the great apes are just beginning to appear on the other.

"Imagine then, the situation when the world with slower evolving life forms has advanced to the point where man appears. What of the other world and the relationship between the two in case they should make contact?"

"This is roughly the situation as it existed in the 'normal' time in which this superior race was discovered. We found them as far ahead of us as we are ahead of the great apes today—and incidentally there is far greater physical differentiation between them and us than between us and the apes.

"As might be expected, they regard us as little more than we

would regard the apes—rather clever apes. Our movements through space, our mechanical achievements are no more to them than the work of clever apes. Though they appear to be a moral, peaceful race, they can find no basis for compassion towards us or interest in communication or trade. There is only one possible relation between us, as there has always been only one possible relation between man and the lower forms of life on earth—that possibility is exploitation.

"Our scientists have demonstrated by means you would not be aware of that this exploitation of man by these—super-men—is inevitable. The hope of combating them and so preventing their exploitation of Earth and man is about as great as a tribe of apes would have of preventing capture by an army of hunters equipped with every scientific gadget you know, from radar to atomic bombs.

"There is only one hope for the future of our race: to bring ourselves to an equal or superior level with respect to this rival race. And it must be done within the space of a very few human generations, according to our predictions. The mutant colony was founded about one generation ago as soon as the full picture of conditions became apparent. Our work indicates that we can feel confident of success, because mutations have been abun-

dant in the development of man. Nature seems to have been generous but wasteful of them.

"We have already produced a generation of the next form of man, and the individuals of that generation are applying all the powers of their minds to the problem. As you can see, our facilities are pyramiding rapidly, since we have created the next form of man, and *they* are busy on the problem of going a step beyond.

"But, back to Walt. We need him. He carries three extremely valuable, recessive mutations which have never been discovered before. We feel that he will enable us to make the second step beyond man as you know him. You wouldn't dare interfere with that critical advancement, if you could understand the full depth of the problem. Unfortunately, first-hand knowledge cannot be given you."

Starbrook had been listening with a gradually increasing tension that left his muscles aching as he abruptly shook his head and forced his attention away from Rogers' face.

"I *don't* know," he said. "I just can't grasp it all so suddenly. If only I could see for myself—"

"You can't," said Rogers with finality. "Ordinarily, of course, we do not complicate our operations with these problems. It is only the accident of your own

peculiar mutation that you have become aware of us at all. We *could* act without your consent at all—”

Starbrook felt a sudden frantic chill sweep through him. He had seen enough to know that these mutants could do as Rogers said. They could steal Walt away and banish him forever in this strange land beyond the doors of the Children's Room.

“It is against our principles to cause pain to anyone,” Rogers continued. “You are a scientist. I want you to follow the teachings provided your son. Study along with him. Learn the facts of our science and finally details of the crisis that faces humanity. If you are not convinced by then, perhaps the Council which controls these matters will bow to your possession, though, frankly, I doubt it. Walt is too important to us.”

“But how can you take *any* of these children without causing pain? How many parents are willing to see them taken away forever? You can't just take them away and leave a vacuum where they have been!”

“No, we don't do that.” Rogers hesitated a moment; then he stepped to a door and called to someone. He sat down again. “We do not simply yank an individual out of his environment and leave a vacuum. That would cause too much disruption of your society, considering the numbers we have

taken. It would lead to too much pain.”

At that moment a figure moved into the room from the doorway through which Rogers had called.

“Walt!” Starbrook rose in amazement. “I didn't know you were here!”

But the boy did not answer, or even look at Starbrook with any recognition.

“He is not finished,” Rogers explained.

“What do you mean?” Starbrook saw now the empty expression on the boy's face, repulsive in its vacuousness. Terror seized him and he staggered back into the chair from which he had risen.

“When we take someone, we provide a substitute to insert in their environment,” said Rogers. “We create a homolog such as this and make the substitution without the knowledge of anyone except the one who joins us.”

Starbrook's horror mounted. “You expect to take Walt and leave us this—this monster!”

Sudden, terrible pain crossed the boy's face, and Rogers rose with a snarl of rage. He led they boy out of the room and returned.

“Starbrook! You're supposed to be a scientist. Act like one!”

“I'm Walt's father first. You could hardly expect me to give up my son and accept that—thing of yours as a substitute!”

“I suppose I was stupid to think that you could view this matter

with any degree of objectivity. We should have simply made the substitution without your knowledge as we have done in all other cases."

"Do you think you could have done that without our knowing your homolog wasn't our son?"

"Of course. It has been done in thousands of other cases. This homolog *is* your son in every respect—or will be when he is completed. Every emotional pattern, memory, instinct, and physical form and composition that goes into your son's makeup is being duplicated. With the exception, of course, of the creative mutations which set Walt apart from other men, and which cannot be duplicated in the homolog. The homolog will fill Walt's place in life in every respect. He will grow and develop and respond to his environment in a manner parallel to that of Walt. He can live a normal, useful life. He can marry, though not reproduce. He has an intelligence comparable to Walt's and will be professionally superior. If you love him or hurt him, if you make him happy or sad, you are doing it to Walt. He *is* Walt. His emotions and feelings are simply transplants, so to speak, of those of your son. That is why you hurt him so terribly just now when you despised him as a monstrosity. What would Walt's reaction be if you called him that? It will take considerable effort to eradicate that painful

experience from the homolog mind."

Abruptly, Rogers rose. "You may have time to think it over. Our final course of action will be decided by the Council. I am only a technical advisor in these matters, but I can tell you that you will be doing yourself, your son, and the human race a great service if you try to comprehend the things you have seen and heard; conversely, a great disservice."

Rogers hesitated. "Perhaps the easiest solution would be for you to come here. It might be arranged since you have the one essential mutation. You could be useful as a technician. A homolog could, of course, be provided to take up the life you leave."

Starbrook, from where he sat, could see the distant view of the strange valley through a window across the room. It bespoke of serenity and peacefulness such as he had not known, and there was evidence of science here such as he had not dreamed of. But he had no purpose here. The invitation was a mere concession to the accident of nature that had granted him his single, useless mutation.

As for leaving Rose—

"Thanks," he said, "but, no."

Rogers nodded and escorted him back to Miss Edythe's office. She was disappointed when Starbrook told her what had happened.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said, "but the world of mutants is a

disappointing place, as I told you before. I suppose we won't be seeing you again, but we'll look forward to the visits of your son. Would you care to take along a couple of new volumes for him?"

The world seemed to have taken on a curiously unreal quality to Starbrook as he left the building and got into his car. He drove mechanically through the streets and along the highway that led to the outskirts of the city where the Bradford Electronics plant was located.

There, he secluded himself in his office with orders to his secretary to keep everyone else out for a while. He leaned back in his chair. Through the window he could see the hazy, disordered landscape of the city, just as through that other window only a few moments ago he had seen the peaceful scene out of that unknown era of the future.

He had no illusions about the reality of that strange vision. The experience carried its own conviction. He knew that he had seen the miracle of a scene from the future, and had spoken to men whose lives lay far ahead of his in the time continuum.

His mind speculated at the fringes of his experience, ever trying to dodge the core of it. But at last he forced himself to face it.

Walt.

He tried to submerge the subjective factors in his mind and

consider the things he'd heard as a scientist should consider them. He didn't doubt the truth of Rogers' statements — and, when he once admitted that to himself, he was left helpless.

Walt would go.

He would carry forward the mutations which he bore so that the race might profit.

It was as simple as that, and there was no alternative.

But that conclusion released the flood of subjective opposition that his mind had held in check. Were a man's feelings for his son to be wholly ignored? They weren't, he reflected bitterly. They were supposed to be expended upon some grisly automaton shaped in the image of his son. Surely Rogers would destroy the thing after he'd seen Starbrook's reaction to it.

And Rose.

Up to now he'd left her reactions out of his thoughts. She was no scientist. She had never pretended to understand the objective, selfless attitudes of science. Surely she would not be able to do so in this. It would be impossible to convince her that Walt's destiny lay with the mutants of a future age.

And what of Walt himself?

Soon he would be faced with full understanding of the thing that he was and his possibilities. Would he choose to go with the mutants?

There was little doubt that he

would. The genius of the boy's mind was tempered with an emotional stability that would let him see the problem whole, that would let him evaluate it without fear and personal prejudice—as Starbrook knew that he should be doing himself.

They *could*, of course, forbid his further study of the books of the Children's Room. They could enforce their will upon him by sheer physical means.

And for the rest of his life he would hate them with an untranscended bitterness. In any profession he undertook he would be taunted by the incubus of longing for lost worlds and vanished dreams. And with it would ride hate—hate and revulsion for the thing that his parents had done.

Starbrook sighed wearily and put away that bitter vision. He forced himself to recognize that he was completely helpless. The decision lay not with him, but with Walt.

He'd have to tell Rose, somehow, he thought. That was the hardest part of all. Harder still, because she could not comprehend the mutant language or see that world of the future. All of it would have to be understood only as he could tell it.

For a while he tried futilely to dispose of some of the work on his desk. It was no use. He cleared it off and gave necessary instructions to his secretary, telling her he'd be back in the morning.

When he reached home, Rose met him in the front hall, her face reflecting her startled surprise.

"Bill! What are you doing home at this time? Nothing's wrong—?"

"Of course not, darling." He lifted her with his hands on her waist. "Just got lonesome for home cooking for lunch. What's on?"

"Bill, you silly. There's nothing on—nothing that would satisfy your gourmandizing. Some fruit salad, sandwiches—for me and Walt."

"Swell. Lead me to it."

It isn't going over, he thought. This isn't the right approach. But what am I going to tell her—

After lunch, he led her into the living room and drew her down beside him on the sofa.

"Bill, what's wrong? Something is on your mind."

He smiled uncertainly. "Yes. There is something special I want to tell you, something I've got to make you understand—about Walt."

"Walt! What has happened—?"

"Something good. It's happened, or *is* happening, and he's going to need all our help and understanding. Darling, do you know what a mutant is?"

Rose furrowed her brow. "I remember something about them in college biology. Six legged calves, fruit flies with extra wings—"

"Yes, but that's the wrong kind. Every improvement in living creatures from the dawn of life has come about through mutations, changes in characteristics of offspring from those of their parents. Rose, Walt is a mutant."

Uncertain disbelief, shock, and revulsion moved in waves across her face. Then slowly, Bill Starbrook began his story. He explained about the books, the Children's Room, and his own experiences there. He told of the mutant colony and their struggle to step up the evolutionary rate of the human race to keep from being swept aside and exploited by more rapidly advancing races. Then he told of the need of Walt's potentialities in that struggle.

When he was finished, Rose was sitting still as ice, her face expressionless. When he touched her hand, it was cold.

"You can't expect me to believe such a story," she said at last. "It isn't true. It couldn't possibly be true. Things like that don't happen."

"They *have* happened," Starbrook pointed out, "perhaps thousands of times in our own generation. It is only by accident that I found out about this instead of Walt's being swept away without our knowledge."

"This must be some kind of a crazy joke, Bill. You can't have believed a word you've said. Why are you telling me this?"

"There are the books—"

"Those books. Yes. Ever since Walt first brought them home I've felt their evil influence. Why, no one can even read them. The characters are like cabalistic scribbling of ancient spells and mysticisms. I *can* believe almost that they are responsible for such fantasies as you have described—in your minds."

"Rose." And suddenly Starbrook knew it was no use, but he went on. "Walt and I can read those books. To us, the characters make sense—because we have the mutations that enable us to read them."

"Please promise me you won't let Walt bring any more of them to the house. Whatever it is that has seized his imagination—and yours—will gradually be forgotten if he doesn't have them around."

Starbrook kept silent. As he looked into Rose's eyes he knew she would never believe this thing. Not until it was too late, anyway—

"I'll see what I can do with Walt," he said wearily. "We can't suddenly force him to avoid the books. He would read them in the library at any cost. But I promise I'll watch him and keep him from being hurt by them."

He got into the car again and drove away. His disappointment hung like a pall over everything, but he had not expected more, he told himself. He could not

expect Rose to act differently. Her utterly conventional mind with its lack of scientific training was a narrow highway over which such ponderous vehicles of revelation could never pass.

Suddenly, he realized he had no destination. He didn't want to go back to the office. He glanced down at his briefcase in which lay the books Miss Edythe had given him for Walt. He'd forgotten to take them to him. He turned downtown and went into the reading room of the public library. There, he began studying the new volumes.

With what was almost a pathetic eagerness now, he wanted to devour every concept of the mutant's colony which he could obtain. He wanted to know that world in which Walt was going to live in all the detail he could.

With somewhat of a shock he realize he was now thinking in terms of Walt's going as a foregone conclusion. Now he wanted to preserve for himself every common facet of experience that would link them after Walt had passed irrevocably through time and space to a far future.

He found the present volumes suddenly different from those that Walt had previously been given. The pretense of fiction and fairy tales was gone. The information being given now was straight stuff. So abstruse was it that Starbuck wondered how Walt could possibly absorb it, but he felt

certain that the mutants had made no mistake. They knew what they were doing.

There began to appear new bits of information that he knew was not part of Earth's science in this age. As he read on, he moved farther and farther into the difficult unknown of the mutants' science.

Slowly, his scientific objectivity began to predominate the mixture of feelings within him. Here was material that would be of inestimable value to his own age. It would be tragic to let it get away without making some attempt to preserve it. He wondered if the mutants would have any objection to that. Evidently not, since Rogers knew he had free access to everything that Walt obtained from the library, and had even advised him to go along with Walt.

He decided to go back to the plant after all. It was late and near quitting time when he arrived, but the photo lab was still open. He took one of the books and gave it to Joe Coppers, the photo technician.

"How soon can you shoot the whole thing? Photostats of each page, say three copies."

The technician frowned as he glanced at the unintelligible pages. "What the devil—?" Then he glanced at Starbuck's face.

"We can get it out tomorrow," he said quickly, "if it's that much of a rush job," he said. "We've

just finished up the instruction book work on that BC-124A set—”

“Good. I’ll be around tomorrow for it—and have some more for you.”

When he returned home, neither he nor Rose made any mention of the incident of the afternoon. Together they went up to Walt’s room to see how he was. His cold was better, and he was lying impatiently reading one of the mutants’ books.

Rose’s face showed only a flicker of emotion as she saw the book, then she returned the smile that Walt gave them.

“Gee, Dad, I thought you were never going to get home. Mom says you were here for lunch and never came up to see a guy flat on his back. What kind of business is that?”

Starbrook ruffled his hair. “Very urgent business or I’d have come up. How’re your viruses—or what the devil do you call more than one of the bugs—”

“They find me pretty poisonous. I’ll be up tomorrow.”

“Not quite,” laughed Rose.

“How about us working on our chess game while Mom gets supper, Dad? We ought to have time for a couple of moves. O.K. Mom?”

“Sure. You go right ahead. I’ll bring yours on a tray.”

When Rose was gone, Walt looked at the briefcase that Starbrook still held. “Did you bring some more books for me?”

Starbrook nodded. He drew out the first of the two that Miss Edythe had given him. “We’ve got to do something about keeping these under cover from now on. They worry your mother. She’s afraid of their influence. She can’t understand what you or I can comprehend in them. I tried to tell her a little about them this afternoon. That’s what I came home for. It’s hopeless. She wants you to get rid of them. You’ll have to do that or else study them undercover.”

For a moment Walt’s young face seemed whiter against the pillow, and at least he shook his head. “I can’t do either. I can’t stop until I know where this is leading. And one of the things I need most is Mom’s understanding of it. Don’t you understand?”

“Yes—I do, but I don’t know what you can do about it.”

“Why couldn’t I teach her to read these books? It seems to me that this language or whatever it is should be so simple to understand. Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know. I had never thought of that. Why don’t you see?”

Surely it would be worth a try, Starbrook thought. He had never supposed that it would be possible for anyone not possessing the particular mutation to be able to read the language. But it was worth hoping for. Walt *needed* all the understanding he could get. It was beginning to tell on

the boy's face, the uncertainty and the glimpsing of new worlds that were terrifying in their impact upon his mind. His yearning and his gift of understanding went out towards his son, but there was so little that was tangible that he could do. He wondered what would happen when the full impact of knowledge of what he was expected to do came to him. But Starbrook had no thought that Walt would turn down the opportunity. In spite of the terrifying aspects of it, Walt would leap at the chance to join the mutants. There was no doubt of that. If only Rose could come to some understanding before it happened—

"Try it tomorrow," said Starbrook suddenly. "Try to get your mother interested in learning the language of the books."

During the forenoon of the following day, Starbrook was forced to return his attention to his work at the plant. Development on a police transceiver was in a boggle, and he spent the whole morning in the lab working with the engineers on it. By early afternoon he broke away long enough to go down to the photo lab.

"Got my stuff ready?" he asked Joe Coppers. "Here's another one for you."

"I hope you and your Chinese friends know what this is all about," grinned the technician. He handed Starbrook the thick piles of photostats.

Starbrook looked at them. "This isn't the stuff I gave you!"

Joe Coppers looked startled. "Sure it is. Here's your original. Same stuff. What's the matter—?"

Starbrook continued to stare at the photostats—and at the original copy. Then he knew what the trouble was. The photostats were absolutely unintelligible to him. Only the original books provided the proper stimuli for his senses. There was something beside the mere form of the symbols—something in the very materials of the book itself.

Slowly, he picked up the books and nodded towards the pile of photostats, "Toss that junk away, Joe. I was wrong. There won't be any more. This stuff won't photograph."

The technician gaped as Starbrook walked out. After the door closed, he swore volubly.

In his office once more, Starbrook faced the problem that the only way to record the material he wanted to preserve would be for him to read it aloud. He ordered up one of the long time magnetic recorders which would run a full day without attention. It would take endless hours of his time. Perhaps he could get Walt to do some of it after the boy was a little farther along.

He began the long task with the volumes at hand and worked until long after everyone else had gone. He called Rose and told her he'd be late. It was after

eleven that night when he finally decided to quit and go home.

He expected the lights to be out in the house. Walt would be asleep, and Rose always went to bed early when she was alone. But when he drove in the driveway the front of the house was ablaze with light.

As he entered the front door, Rose looked up. With somewhat of a start, Starbrook noticed she had one of the mutants' books on her lap.

She saw his glance go towards it at once.

"I'm afraid, Bill," she said in a thin, fear-ridden voice. "I've never been so afraid in my life."

"Rose—!"

"Walt wanted to try to teach me to read these books. Just to humor him I let him, and I found out that I *can* learn it. Already I can pick out words and sentences, even whole paragraphs here and there. Oh, Bill, I don't want to read it!"

"But you must—now that you know you can," he said quietly. "You know that, don't you?"

She nodded, her face tight with terror. "That story you told me yesterday. It can't be true—!"

"Please, Rose," He sat down beside her and tightened his arm around her shoulders. "We've got to realize that we've had a very wonderful privilege in knowing Walt—in bringing him into the world, because he's going to do something wonderful."

"I just can't think of it that way. I just can't He's my baby."

"Yeah," said Starbrook thickly. "He's mine, too—"

He wondered how long it would be now. Walt's cold was soon better and he returned to school. He brought home new books regularly from the Children's Room, at the rate which the mutants allowed.

Starbrook labored fiercely to keep up with Walt's speed in understanding the new science revealed in tantalizing snatches and mere introductory expositions. He had to depend now on Walt's interpretations to a great extent, and the work of transcribing the information to the recorders went slowly, even with Walt's assistance in the reading and segregation of material.

In growing tension, Starbrook began to greet each day somehow as if it were the last he would ever know. He tried to suck the essence of living from each passing moment, for he knew that almost any time now the mutants would reveal their purposes to Walt and claim him for their own. And in that moment something of Starbrook would be eternally dead.

His admiration for Rose increased as she continued doggedly her study of the mutant language. It had seemed easy for her at first, but now it became apparent that she would never get

past the first volumes in which the situation of the mutants scattered throughout the Earth was presented in fantasy and allegory.

But Starbrook was not prepared for the change which was becoming more apparent in Rose day by day. The terror was slowly giving way to a strange serenity, almost a resignation that was in itself somehow frightening to Starbrook. It seemed as if she had found some secret of her own in those pages, which neither he nor Walt had discovered.

He wanted to ask her about it, but he knew that when this new feeling came to a focus, she'd tell him.

She did. It was just two weeks after Walt had started back to school. They were sitting in the early twilight on the front steps watching Walt riding away on his bicycle to join the baseball game in the park two blocks away.

"It will be lonesome," said Rose suddenly, "but there's happiness in memory."

Rose!

"It seems like I've found out just this moment what those stories in your mutants' books have been saying all this time. I've read them over and over, and I can't go beyond the stories, but I understand *them* now."

"What do you understand?" said Starbrook.

"I understand that Walt *is* different. I think I've always known it, really. Not just his high intel-

ligence, but other things, too. I understand now that he is one of the lonely men whom the book has been sent into the world to gather. I know that unless he goes with his own kind he'll be forever lonely, and his life will be wasted. I wouldn't want that, no matter what the pain of sending him away might be."

"The—story—convinced you of that?"

Starbrook pondered the semantic power of the mutant language. What secrets lay behind its powers to shape the human will to the wishes of the writers might never be known, but he knew there was a vast science evident here that was hardly dreamed of in his age. Semantics that could reduce all Rose's fears to a calm serenity and persuade her that her only child should be sacrificed to the unknown future of the race. There was no understanding such powers yet—

He said, "It will be easier on Walt when he knows, now that you are willing for him to pursue his own destiny."

"We've had him for ten happy years. It's been a lot. When will they tell him?"

"I don't know. Whenever they think he's ready. It might be any day now."

Starbrook had told himself that he was prepared, but when the moment came, he knew that he could never have been equipped to accept the fact unemotionally.

It was the very next day when he came home from the plant that he found Rose and Walt together in the living room. Something went dead within him at the sight of their white faces. They had both been crying.

"They told me today," said Walt without waiting for him to speak. "They told me what you already knew all the time."

Starbrook fought down the tight swelling in his throat. "Yes, I knew. I've been waiting for you to become ready."

"But you're not going?" Walt looked in agonized despair from his father to his mother and back again. "Somehow I'd always thought because you could read them, too—that you were like me—"

Starbrook shook his head and smiled wanly. "No. I'm just a sort of freak that they've never run into before. I'm no good to them, so I won't be going. Besides, your mother will need me—"

"I'll miss you—!" Tears sprang again into his reddened eyes.

"You won't be lonely," said Starbrook with a calm that surprised himself. "That's why you're going away. If you stayed here, you would be the loneliest of men because you have a thousand talents and abilities that would only be smothered and subdued. You'd be misunderstood, despised for your superior attributes, and your whole life would be bitter. It will be far

better where you are going. They will understand you and will be your kind."

"Yes, I know all that," said Walt thinly, "—but I'll still be lonely for you—"

It would pass, Starbrook thought. It had to pass. In the end it would be the best. He knew that what he had said was true.

"You don't have to go—" he said.

"Oh, but I do! It's just kind of hard right now—"

That's what Starbrook wanted to be sure of. He smiled approvingly. "Do you know when?"

"Right away. Tonight!"

"Tonight!" All Starbrook's defenses seemed to collapse before that single word.

"In less than a couple of hours from now. Some emergency has come up. I don't know what, exactly. They've got to move the Children's Room to some other age right away—something about picking up an important mutant who is about to be destroyed in some future time. They're holding the movement now just for me."

"Then there's time for dinner together," said Starbrook. "Let's have it a time to remember."

"It's all ready," said Rose, drying her eyes. "We were waiting for you."

It was a time to remember—and a time for remembering. They went back and picked out the

gems from the thousand moments of happiness they had known together and touched them again, fondling them, hugging them close in their memories.

And swiftly the moments passed until there were no more left.

Walt glanced at the clock. "I've got to be going."

They got into the car and Starbrook drove slowly away from the curb. With each new moment it seemed as if the impact of realization came all over again—the realization that Walt would not be riding back this way with them. These houses and this street, those friends who were waving to Walt from across the way, none of them would ever know his presence again. And suddenly, Starbrook wondered how his absence would be explained—

Sounds all about them seemed to be suppressed as if it were a dream and the car was floating soundlessly through space. Almost as if without Starbrook's conscious direction, it approached the college campus and came to a halt before the library where lights were visible in the main reading room.

"Maybe you won't want to come in," said Walt hesitantly.

"Of course we will," said Rose in a steady voice.

Starbrook remembered that she had never seen an entry into the Children's Room. He wondered

how it would appear to her.

With Walt between them they walked slowly towards the building.

"Gee, Dad," said Walt suddenly. "I forgot to put my bike up. It looks like rain. Will you put it away for me?"

"Yeah. Yeah—sure—"

The futility of that impulsive request washed over them in a suffocating wave of desolation. Silently, they mounted the steps and entered the foyer.

"It's here." Starbrook touched his wife's hand.

"Where? I don't see anything. But, of course—"

He pointed to the inscription over the door.

She shook her head. "I can't quite make it out. That blank wall, Bill! How can there be a door there that I can't see—?"

Some of the old fear was returning to her eyes.

"It's there. Walt's going towards it, now. Perhaps he'll disappear to your eyes."

The boy turned for one final, backward glance. He smiled warmly and confidently and held up a hand. Then he walked on into the room.

Rose gave a little cry as he vanished from her sight. "Bill—can you see him? Where did he go?"

"He's right there, darling. He's talking to Miss Edythe and Dr. Rogers. There are a lot of the other boys in there, too. There's a Chinese boy and some that are

European. This library must have doors into all the world."

"What's Walt doing now?"

"Just waiting. Dr. Rogers has his arm around his shoulders. He looks happy, darling. He *is* happy. This is the way it should be."

Suddenly, while he spoke, the doorway into the Children's Room seemed to grow milky. It wavered and blurred as if his vision were failing. Impulsively, he took a step forward and waved. He glimpsed Walt's face, smiling and joyous, and his hand waving in farewell."

"He's gone."

Rose crumpled against him. Her face buried in his shoulder, and she stood there sobbing uncontrollably for a moment. Then at last she raised her head and looked at Starbrook. Her eyes were shining in spite of the longing in them.

"I'm sorry, Bill. I just couldn't help that one."

"Shall we go back now?"

They started down the steps as the light drizzle began to fall.

"It's raining," said Rose. "And Walt's bike is still out. You mustn't forget that. It's the last thing I can ever do for him."

He glanced towards the curb, at their car which they had left empty. With a start, he realized that it wasn't empty now. There was a figure in the back seat, a face watching them through the window.

Rose saw it, too, and cried out in momentary fright.

A chill of terror swept through Starbrook.

The homolog.

He had forgotten it. He had supposed that Rogers had destroyed it because he'd said they wouldn't want it.

He closed his eyes a moment and prayed silently that this nightmare monster might vanish, this parody of Walt—

It was looking at them with Walt's face, Walt's eyes, and Walt's smile was upon its lips.

And it called to them.

Walt's voice.

"I hurried and got my books. I thought you wanted to get back home right away. Let's hurry now, because I left my bike out in the rain."

The hard knot within Starbrook seemed to soften. This was not the staring, empty face he had seen in Rogers' laboratory that day. He remembered how Rogers had warned him that it hadn't been completed. When it was, he'd said it would be every feeling, every emotion, every memory that had been Walt. It would react in every way exactly as Walt would have reacted.

And Rose had not seen the homolog before its completion. Something of that first shock was leaving her face as she recognized what it was. She moved forward slowly.

"It's Walt," she said in a half

whisper. "It's everything of Walt that could have been ours anyway. And I thought it would be some crude mechanical thing from what you said. Oh, darling, they've taken their mutant and given our son back to us!"

Semantic control—wish fulfillment—whatever it was, Starbrook thought, then Rose who hadn't read the mutants' books would not have accepted the homolog so readily.

And yet—perhaps it was some influence they'd exercised over him, too—why not? Wasn't the homolog everything that Walt had been? The exact pattern of his instincts, reactions, emotions, memories. What else was there that constituted a human being?

Even the question of identity seemed to diminish as he thought of that last vision of Walt standing content and happy amid the other mutants about to begin their long journey.

The homolog got out of the car. He ran towards them as they moved slowly toward it.

"What's the matter? Mother—Dad, you look so strange. Is anything wrong?"

Starbrook smiled. "Not a thing in the world—son. Your mother and I were just thinking how lucky we are—in a lot of ways. Come on, we'd better beat it home and get that bike in out of the rain."

The End

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THE SIREN SOUNDS AT MIDNIGHT

BY FRANK M. ROBINSON

Since the perfection of the atom bomb, many fiction writers have been accused of being prophets of doom. They have annihilated, maimed, and mangled the earth and most of its inhabitants so often that many readers have already died quite often while waiting for the real thing to turn up.

Thus, stories on this theme have two strikes against them when they arrive in our office. But writers like Frank Robinson look on taboos as a challenge. In this case, Frank needed but one strike to connect.

“WHAT time is it?” she asked.
“About six o’clock.” He glanced at the kitchen clock.
“Five minutes to,” he corrected.

“We’ve got about six hours then, haven’t we?”

“Just about.”

She ran the rag across the dish and sudsed it up and down in the warm water. “It seems kind of foolish to stand here and do the dishes.”

“It wouldn’t do any good to run.” He finished drying the dish he had in his hands, then put down his towel and took her wet hands in his. “Are you frightened?”

She looked up at him and for the hundredth time that day he considered how fortunate he was. It had been forty years or more and her hair had faded to silver and the once young face had become seamed and lined, but the look in her eyes had never changed.

“I’m trying not to be,” she said, but her voice trembled slightly. She clutched his hands for a moment longer, then went back to the dishes. “Do you think it had to come to this?”

“I suppose it had to come to a showdown sometime,” he said thoughtfully.

"You don't think that perhaps . . . they'll compromise."

He had lied to her many times in the past, he thought. Once, a long time ago, just a few years after they were married, he had lied. A black lie, which she quietly discovered and for which she quietly forgave him, and he had lived under the burden of the lie and hadn't discovered her forgiveness until years later. And once a white lie, the time when little Joseph had been so sick.

But now there was time for only the truth.

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "I think, perhaps, they've forgotten how to compromise."

She was washing the frying pan now, rubbing the steel wool over it as if it was the last time she was ever going to clean it.

"How bad . . . are the bombs?" she asked.

He didn't want to tell her, it wouldn't do her any good. But then, perhaps she had a right to know.

"They're the new ones," he said quietly. "The ones that blanket a whole area, not just a city."

"I was reading in the paper," she said. "A scientist, I think. And he said that this time they could end . . . everything."

"I know."

She ran cold water into the sink and watched the soap bubbles break and disappear and the white curd run down the drain.

"I don't understand," she said. "Some people say the sirens at city hall will sound at nine, and others say midnight."

"Midnight our time," he explained. "If they reach a compromise, there won't be any sirens at all. If they don't, then the sirens will sound at midnight."

"And then?"

He shrugged. "It won't be long after that."

She wiped her hands and he saw with a pang that they were red and wrinkled and thought of how many times he had made a half promise to buy her a dishwasher. There were so many things he had wanted to get her, so many things he had wanted to do for her. But he was always going to do it tomorrow, and now they had run out of tomorrows.

"We'll have to be going in a little while," he said.

She hung up her apron. "What time do the services start?"

"Seven, I think."

"I want to look at the house first," she said.

Houses, he thought, were memories more than they were wood and plaster. The dining room set they had bought on time so long ago and which had taken years to pay for, the bridge table at which they had entertained Ted and Irma so many times during the winter months, the spare bedroom he had added to the house

when Joseph had been born.

And other things. The leaky faucet he had promised he would fix all last year, the screen door with the screening torn loose at the bottom, and the sagging walls on the coal bin that needed bracing.

He wouldn't have time to fix them now, he thought, and then smiled to himself. In a way, he was almost relieved.

His wife was ready to go. She looked small and dowdy in her worn coat and hat and he had another flash of regret. A little white-haired old lady, slightly stooped and frail, in a hat and coat ten years out of date. She could have married a man who would have provided for her so much better than he, he thought, and wondered why she hadn't.

She was standing in the living room, taking one last look, to be sure the scene was impressed on her memory. She walked over to one of the end tables and ran her finger lightly over the thin film of dust, then turned to him and managed a smile.

"I guess it's time to leave," she said.

Out on the porch she asked: "What time is it?"

"A quarter to seven."

She sounded relieved. "We've got five hours then."

It was a warm spring night, the kind of night that had always

meant the beginning and not the end. The street lamps had just come on and wore bright haloes of light under the thick archway of trees that lined the street.

He stood on the porch steps for a moment, anxiously scanning the myriad of stars that flickered and burned overhead, searching for the tell-tale flutter of flame that would mark one of the rocket-missiles. But it was too early. The deadline was still hours away, and no nation would dare to do anything before then. It wouldn't be legal, and such things always had to be done legally.

"It's a nice night," he said. "Let's walk."

They started down the porch steps. He remembered that he hadn't locked the front door but he didn't bother going back.

The neighbors were drifting up the street in twos and threes, making small talk among themselves and nodding quietly to each other as they passed. On the corner, Harry Brown had pulled the shades in his tavern and was just locking up for the night.

He wouldn't have recognized Harry, not without his bow-tie and white shirt and apron. In a worn, brown business suit Harry looked like anybody else except, perhaps, more worried and tired looking.

"I should think they would have lots of business tonight," his wife said in a low voice.

He shook his head. "No, not tonight. You drink for your illusions." He paused. "I think there is a night in everyone's life when you have to see yourself as you actually are, without your illusions to touch up the job. Tonight's that sort of night."

They could have been kinder to the Browns, he thought, as they walked on by. The whole neighborhood could have. You bought your beer there and you were friends over the counter, but a tavern keeper and his wife weren't people you invited into your home, or so the social code went.

He wondered how lonely the Browns must have been, how much they must have hated it there.

The church was crowded. He couldn't remember having seen such a crowd in church even for the Christmas or the Easter service. All the folding chairs at the

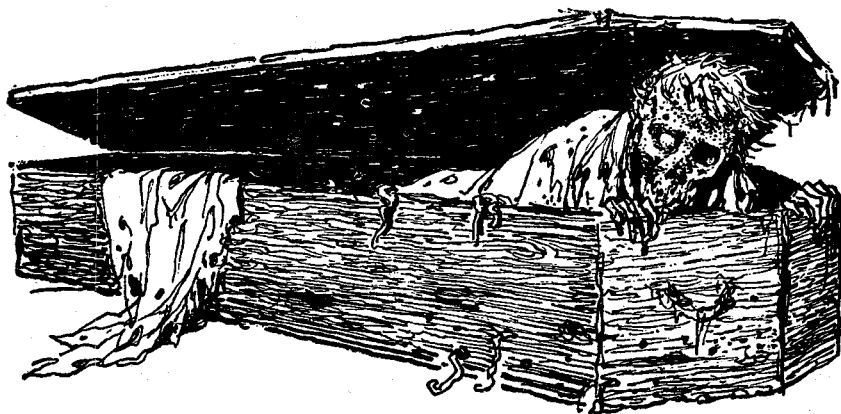
back were taken but the people who still streamed in didn't seem to be bothered by the standing room only.

Everybody was there, he thought. Old people and young people and people they hadn't seen for months. There were rows of high school boys who looked oddly intent and wide awake, along with girls who had giggled and shrieked their way home from school every afternoon dressed in blue jeans and loafers. They were soberly dressed and wore an almost adult composure now. And there were little children who were either red-eyed and still or were sobbing quietly in their mother's arms, not understanding what was going on.

They sang *Rock of Ages* and *Lead, Kindly Light* and all the verses of *Jerusalem*.

The minister chose his sermon from the Twenty-Third Psalm.

Yea, though I walk through the



valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Everybody was there, he thought again. Even Parker Wright, the colored man who usually went to the Baptist church at the edge of town. But tonight nobody had time to observe the unwritten laws.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The minister spoke the words he found in his heart, and then announced a silent prayer. At the end, he invited those who wished to stay to remain, while the others left.

"Let's go."

His wife looked at him questioningly.

"I have to walk," he said kindly. "I have to think."

They saw Joseph and his wife at the door, but the couple didn't wait for them.

"You could have said something," she said.

"No, no, he wouldn't have heard me."

"I think he would have heard this time."

"Perhaps next time," he said, and then remembered with a sudden bitterness that there wouldn't be a next time.

He could have been a better father to his children, he thought.

He could have been nicer to his son's wife, of whom he had never fully approved, though now he couldn't remember why.

"Where do you want to go?" his wife asked quietly.

"The park," he said. He smiled down at her. "It reminds me of a long time ago."

"What time is it?"

"Eleven o'clock."

They sat on a bench in the park and felt the evening chill steal upon them but they didn't move. Couples strolled along the pathway hand in hand, their faces grim or tender as the case might be. Below the pathway and the benches was a small, grassy glade. It was almost filled now with the shadowy figures of people and the still red fireflies of lit cigarettes.

"I feel sorry for them," his wife said, nodding at a passing young couple. "They have so much more to lose than we have."

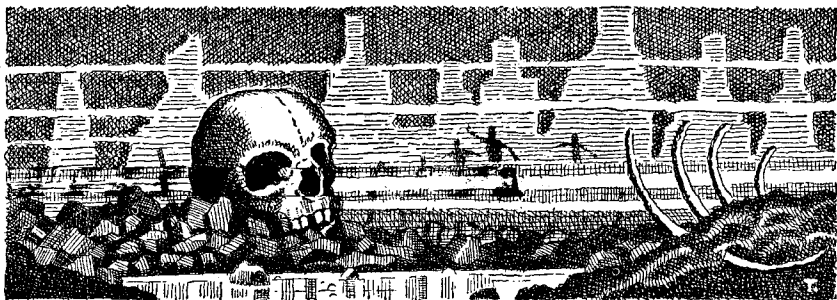
"It's been a good life."

"It depends," she said simply, "on how you've lived it."

Had it been a good life? he thought abstractly. Or had it been only past regrets and future fears, as some poet had put it?

No, he thought. It had been a good life. But you had to be an old man to know just how good.

He dozed and dreamed back to the small quiet lakes in northern Wisconsin where he had spent so



many happy summers as a boy, to the smell of the pine trees and the feel of the dry needles crunching beneath his feet when he had taken long walks through the woods. The feeling of satisfaction when he had a full catch of fish; the sun sinking in the lake at night-fall, glinting in fading little pools of red across the surface as the waves mirrored it for an instant.

"What were you thinking?"

"Just dreaming," he said, "of when I was young."

"So was I."

They were quiet for a moment, alone with their thoughts, yet sharing them.

"What did you like the best?" he asked.

She thought about it. "The people," she said at last. "I think I liked the people."

The people, he thought. The meek who were supposed to inherit the earth and who had made such a mess of it.

"Do you think," he burst out, "do you think if we had it to do

all over again that it would be any different? That people would live and let live? Or do you think it would turn out to be just like it is now?"

"I think," she said, "that it would be nice to have another chance."

Another chance, he thought. Another chance to love thy neighbor and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. He smiled.

He lapsed into a moody silence, then: "Why did you marry me?" he asked suddenly.

She smiled in the darkness.

"Because I loved you."

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Midnight."

She shivered slightly and he put his arm around her shoulders and felt her relax under the reassuring pressure.

"I'm not afraid," she said quietly.

"Shh."

He cocked an ear.

"Listen."

The night was still.

Continued from page 5

Briton's can do. **THE UNCENSORED MAN** (Berkely, 60¢) is a parallel dimension book that can be read with a good deal of pleasure, and actually puts a new twist on the theme.

A GUEST REVIEW BY BRIAN W. ALDISS

THE TECHNICOLOR TIME MACHINE by Harry Harrison (Doubleday, \$3.95).

It is now recognized that Harry Harrison is one of the best story tellers of modern science fiction. Since **DEATHWORLD**, ten years ago, he has never given us a dull book.

After his grim and masterly **MAKE ROOM! MAKE ROOM!**, Harrison sits back and cons us into believing that a near-bankrupt Hollywood film studio, Climatic, uses a time-machine to flit to the Eleventh Century, to film the Viking saga of the discovery of America *in situ*.

Although the story line sounds rather thin, it turns out to be full of rewards, mainly because Harrison has a fine central character in Barney Hendrickson, the producer making this absurd epic. Ranged round Barney are a likeable cast of hard-drinking film

men and Vikings, and the sexy star, Slithey Tove, who eventually goes native.

With bankruptcy threatening, Barney has to shoot his film in a week. But there is plenty of time in the past; from the Eleventh Century, the film men can shuttle still further back for vacations (and immense dishes of fried trilobite), without losing a day of present time. So the film gets into the can on schedule, but not before everyone has survived several fights and a lot of primitive scenery. This will knock hell out of the space viking market!

One of the most engaging features of Harrison's novel is the cheerful cynicism running through it. Harrison is an anti-romantic; and his carefully prepared ending—which wild trilobites couldn't make me reveal—is a land mine set off under the Norse epic. In addition, it makes anti-hero Barney one of the great heroes of all time.

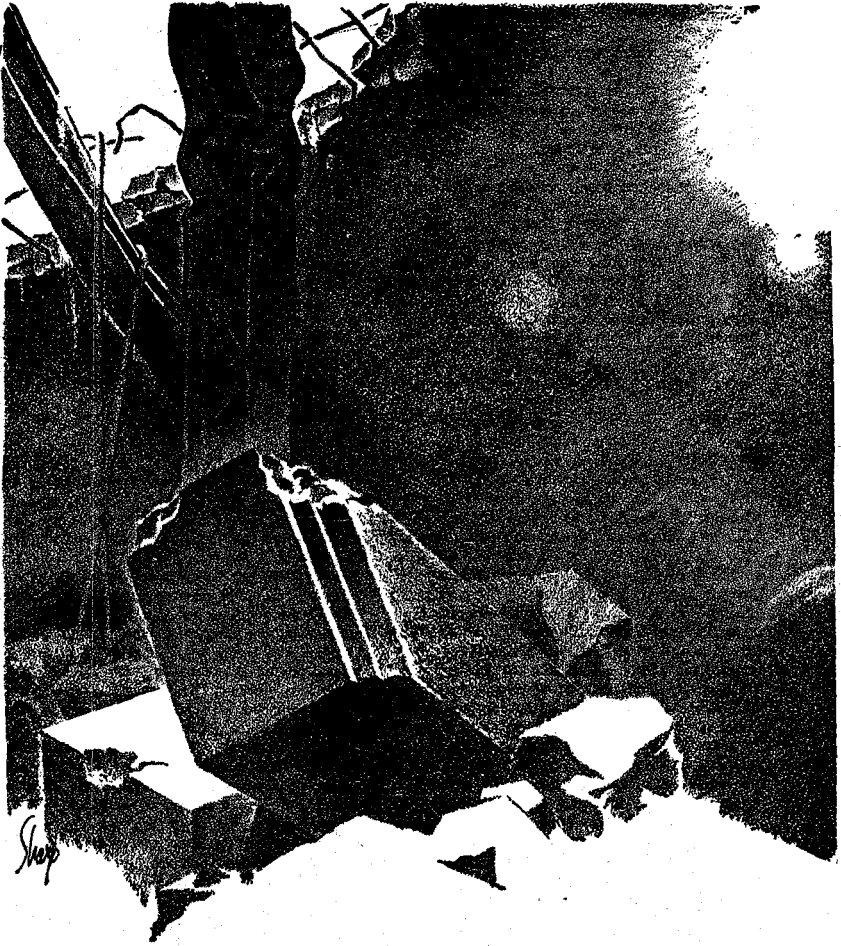
TECHNICOLOR TIME MACHINE is a splendid romp, all the better for serious intentions lurking in the background.

The End

Don't Miss

RICHARD C. MEREDITH'S GREAT NEW NOVELET

THE LONGEST VOYAGE IN THE Sept FANTASTIC



Illustrated by SHARP

More lyrical science fiction from the typewriter of Theodore Sturgeon. A tale of the future and Vernon Drecksall—monomaniacal potwasher and amateur violinist — who spends twenty-two years composing a largo which he intends to play only once — and in a concert hall built for three!

LARGO

By THEODORE STURGEON



LARGO

105

The chandeliers on the eighty-first floor of the Empire State Building swung wildly without any reason. A company of soldiers marched over a new, well-built bridge, and it collapsed. Enrico Caruso filled his lungs and sang, and the crystal glass before him shattered.

And Vernon Drecksall composed his Largo.

He composed it in hotel rooms and scored it on trains and ships, and it took more than twenty-two years. He started it in the days when smoke hung over the city, because factories used coal instead of broadcast power; when men spoke to men over wires and never saw each other's faces; when the nations of earth were ruled by the greed of a man or the greed of men. During the Thirty Days War and the Great Change which followed it, he labored; and he finished it on the day of his death.

It was music. That is a silly, inarticulate phrase. I heard a woman say "Thank you" to the doctor who cured her cancer, and then she cried, for the words said so little. I knew a man who was born lonely, and whose loneliness increased as he lived until it was a terrible thing. And then he met the girl he was to marry, and one night he said, "I love you." Just words; but they filled the incredibly vast emptiness within him; filled it completely, so that there was enough left over to spill

out in three syllables, eight letters . . . The Largo—it was music. Break away from individual words; separate yourself from the meaning of them strung together, and try to imagine music like Drecksall's Largo in E Flat. Each note was more than polished—burnished. As music is defined as a succession of notes, so the Largo was a thing surpassing music; for its rests, its upbeats, its melodic pauses were silences blended in harmony, in discord. Only Drecksall's genius could give tangible, recognizable tone to silence. The music created scales and keys and chords of silence, which played in exquisite counterpoint with the audible themes.

It was dedicated to Drecksall himself, because he was a true genius, which means that everything in the universe which was not a part of him existed for him. But the Largo was written for Wylie, and inspired by Gretel.

They were all young when they met. It was at a summer resort, one of those strange outposts of city settlement houses. The guests were plumbers and artists and bankers and stenographers and gravicab drivers and students. Pascal Wylie was shrewd and stocky, and came there to squander a small inheritance at a place where people would be impressed by it. He had himself convinced that when the paltry thousands were gone he could ease himself into a position where

more could be gotten by someone else's efforts. Unfortunately this was quite true. It is hardly just, but people like that can always find a moneymaker to whom their parasitism is indispensable.

Gretel was one of the students. Without enthusiasm, she attended a school in the city which taught a trade for which she was not fitted and which would not have supported her if she had been. Wylie's feminine counterpart, she was spending her marriageable years as he spent his money, in places where it would impress others less fortunate. Like him, she lived in a passively certain expectation that when her unearned assets were gone, the future would replace them. Her most valuable possession was a quick smile and a swifter glance, which she used very often—when, in fact, a remark was made in her presence which she did not understand. The smile and the glance were humorous and understanding and completely misleading. The subtler the remark, the quicker her reaction. Her rather full lips she held slightly parted, and one watched them to catch the brilliantly wise thought they were about to utter. They never did. She was always surrounded by quasi-sophisticates and pseudo-intellectuals whose conversation got farther and farther above her silly head until she retreated behind one slightly raised golden eyebrow, her whole

manner indicating that the company was clever, but a bit below her. She was unbelievably dumb and an utterly fascinating person to know slightly.

Vernon Drecksall washed pots and groomed vegetables for the waspish cook. He had a violin and he cared about little else, but he had discovered that to be able to play he must eat, and this job served to harness his soul to earth, where it did not belong. He got as many dollars each week as he worked hours each day, an arrangement which was quite satisfactory by his peculiar standards.

Each night after Drecksall had scoured the last of his eight dozen pots, disposed of his three bushels of garbage, and swabbed down an acre and a half of floor-space, he went to his room for his violin and then headed for the privacy of distance. Up into the forest on a rocky trail that took him to the brink of a hilltop lake he would go; beating through thick undergrowth he reached a granite boulder that shouldered out into the water at the end of a point. Night after night he stood there on that natural stage and played with almost heartbreaking abandon. Before him stretched the warm, black water, studded with starlight, like the eyes of an audience. Like the glow of an usher's torch, the riding lights of a passing heliplane would move over the water. Like the breath-

ing of twenty thousand spell-bound people, the water pressed and stroked and rustled on the bank. But there was never any applause. That suited his mood. They didn't applaud Lincoln at Gettysburg either.

Every ten days the pot-walloper was given a day off, which meant that he worked only until noon, which, again, generally turned out to be four in the afternoon after various emergency odds and ends had been taken care of. Then he had the privilege of circulating among people who disliked him on sight while he mourned that the woods were full of vandals and the lake was full of boats and the tele-juke box was incapable of anything but rhythmically insincere approaches to total discord. He didn't look forward to his day off, until he saw Gretel.

She was sitting on an ancient Hammond electric organ, staring off into space, and thinking about absolutely nothing. The mountain sunset streamed through a window behind her, making her hair a halo and her profiled body the only thing in the universe fit to be framed by that glorious light. Dredsall was unprepared for the sight; he was blinded and enslaved. He didn't believe her. She must be music. It was, for him, a perfectly rational conclusion, for she was past all understanding, and until now nothing not musical had struck him that

way. He moved over to her and told her so. He was not trying to be poetic when he said, "Someone played you on the organ, and you were too lovely to come out as sound." He was simply stating what he believed.

She sat above him and turned her head. She gave him an unfathomable half-smile, and as she drew her breath, the golden glow from behind her crept around her cheek and tinted the arched flesh of her nostrils. It was an exquisite gesture; she saw in his eyes that she had pleased him and thought, "*He stinks of grease and ammonia.*"

He put out his hand and touched her. He was actually afraid that she would slip back into a swelling of symphonic sound, sweep over him and be gone past all remembering.

"Are you a real woman who will be alive?" he faltered.

Stupid questions are not always stupid to stupid people. "Of course," she said.

Then he asked her to marry him.

She looked at his craggy face and boniness and his hollow chest and mad-looking eyes and shook her head. He backed away from her, turned and ran. He looked once over his shoulder, and caught the picture of her that lighted his brain until the day he died. For there, in light and shade, in warm flesh and cool colors, was the Largo; and he would have to

live until he turned her back into music. He could not command her as she was; but if he could duplicate her in sharps and flats and heart-stopping syncopation, then she would be his. As he ran, staring back, his head *thwacked* on the doorpost, and he staggered on, all blood and tears.

Gretel looked pensively at her fingernails. "Good God," she said, "what a dope." And she went back to her cowlike mental vacancy.

A couple of nights later Gretel and Pascal Wylie were in a canoe on the hilltop lake, blandly violating the sacredness Drecksall had invested in her, when they heard music.

"What's that?" said Wylie sharply.

"Vi'lin," said Gretel. For her the subject closed with an almost audible snap, but Wylie's peering mind was diverted; and seeing this, she accepted it without protest, as she accepted all things. "Wonder who it is?" said Wylie. He touched a lever, and the silent solenoid-impulse motor in the stern of the canoe wafted them toward the sound.

"It's that kitchen-boy!" whispered Wylie a moment later.

Gretel roused herself enough to look. "He's crazy," she said coldly. She wished vaguely that Wylie would take her away from the sound of the violin or that Drecksall would stop playing. Or—play something else. She had

never heard these notes before, which was not surprising considering the kind of music Drecksall played. But such music had never bothered her until now. Very little ever bothered her. She made an almost recognizable effort to understand why she didn't understand like it, realized that it made her feel ashamed, assumed that she was ashamed because she was out with Wylie, and dropped the matter. Having reasoned past the music itself, she was no longer interested. She might have been had she realized that it was her own portrait in someone else's eyes that she had listened to.

Wylie felt himself stirred too, but differently. It didn't matter to him why this scullery lad was scraping a fiddle on the lakeshore when he should have been asleep. The thing that struck him was that the man could make that violin talk. He made it get inside you—inside people who didn't give a damn, like Wylie. Wylie began to wonder why the hands that performed that way had taken on a duty of washing pots. He had learned early that the best way to get along (to him that meant to get rich) was to find your best talent and exploit it. Here was a man wasting a talent on trees and fish.

Music is a science as well as an art, and it is a shocking thing to those who think that musicians are by nature incompetent

and impractical, to discover that more often than not a musician has a strong mechanical flair. Conversely, a person who is unmechanical is seldom musical. Drecksall's playing on this particular night was careful, thoughtful, precise. He was building something quite as tangible to him as a bridge is to an engineer. The future whole was awe-inspiring, beautiful, but, like the bridge, it was composed of quite unromantic essentials—tonal nuts, bolts and rivets. It was the skillful machining of these that intrigued Wylie, possibly far more than would the completed work.

Drecksall paused at the end of a bewildering arpeggio, and stood with his violin in his hand, staring puzzledly across the water. He had just realized the enormity of his task, and was completely wrapped up in it, so was totally unprepared for Wylie's sudden burst of clapping. It was not applause, exactly; Wylie was glad-handing, following the birth of a bright idea. He had an idea he would butter up the violinist, befriend him, get him to someone who would know if he was really any good or not from a commercial point of view. If he was, Wylie could take a cut, maybe. Ten percent — forty — seventy-five? Drecksall was young. He would last a long time, and he looked like a dope.

So he cracked his lean hands together and whistled shrilly, like

a grandfather at a burlesque house. Surely the ape would appreciate enthusiasm!

Drecksall leapt like a startled moose, nearly lost his footing, and then froze, peering toward the dark canoe, a hot smoke of anger curling into his brain. He felt stripped, imposed upon. He felt kicked. His night playing demanded infinitely more privacy than his body, and it was being rudely stared at. He suddenly broke the violin over his knee, hurled the pieces at the canoe, and ran into the dark woods.

"I told you he was crazy," said Gretel complacently.

It was a long time before Pascal Wylie could puff the wind back into his sails.

Two days later Drecksall was returning from a copse a hundred yards from the resort's main building, carrying a couple of large garbage pails. There was an incinerator back there, and as he left it, he heard the whirring of rotary wings. He looked up and saw a cab descending, and would have ignored it altogether had he not noticed that the man who climbed out and paid the driver had a violin-case under his arm. Drecksall looked at it the way a prep-school boy looks at a soft-drink calendar.

"Hi," said Pascal Wylie. Drecksall nodded.

"I want to talk to you," said Wylie.

"Mc?" Drecksall couldn't take

his eyes off the violin.

"Yeh. Heard you lost your fiddle."

Drecksall just stared. Wylie grinned and handed over the instrument. Drecksall dropped his garbage cans, clasped the case and clawed it open. The violin was a good one, complete with three bows, spare strings, and a pitch pipe. Drecksall stood helplessly, his wide mouth trying fruitlessly to say the same thing his eyes were saying.

"You want that violin?" asked Wylie braskly. The question needed no answer. "It's yours if you'll do me a favor."

"What?"

Wylie gestured toward the cab. "Just hop in there with me. We'll run into the city, and you'll play that thing for a friend of mine. Chances are that after he hears you you can go right on playing as long as you want to, and you'll never wash another pot. How's it strike you?"

Drecksall looked at the tumbled garbage cans. "I can't leave here," he said. "I'd lose my job."

Wylie was not thinking about that. If the violinist failed the audition, he would starve—and he could, for all Wylie cared. But he thought the man had a chance. He snatched the violin and walked toward the cab. "Okay, then."

Drecksall picked up the cans and stared after Wylie. His would-be manager climbed in, giving not a backward glance. With ela-

borate carelessness, however, he did manage to have a great deal of difficulty in getting the violin-case in after him. It hung, black and shining and desirable, for seconds; and suddenly Drecksall realized just how badly those cans smelled. He ran to the cab and climbed in.

"Good boy," said Wylie.

Drecksall took the violin-case from him and opened it. "I never had a violin as nice as this before," he said simply.

The audition went off smoothly. Drecksall was led into a sound-proof room containing a novachord and an unpleasing female organist. He was handed a sheaf of sheet music which, but for the individual titles, he thereafter ignored. A red light flashed, a speaker baffle said boredly, "Go ahead, please," and Drecksall played. He played for an hour, stopping twice in the middle of selections to tune his violin, which was new and springy, and once to upbraid the organist, who, after the first few bars, had never played better in her life.

Afterward, in another room, Wylie was called in to speak to an official. He crossed the room and, with his hat on, perched easily on the edge of the man's desk and looked at his fingernails until the man spoke.

"You're this fellow's manager?"

"Mmmm."

"Eight hundred for thirty min-

utes five times weekly, thirteen weeks." He dragged a contract form out of the desk, filled in some spaces, and shoved it over to Wylie. Wylie looked at it gingerly as if it was one of Drecksall's garbage pails, took the pen, crossed out the \$800 and wrote in \$5000. Then he yawned and looked out of the window.

"Don't be silly," said the radio executive. He looked keenly at Wylie, sighed, and drew up another contract. It was for two thousand. Wylie signed with alacrity. "Make that out in two checks, payable to cash," he said. "One eighteen hundred, and one two hundred."

The man behind the desk made out the checks. "You're is the ten percent check?" he asked. Wylie smiled.

"I think you're a heel," said the exec, and handed the papers over.

At the door, Wylie tipped his hat and grinned. "Thank you very much, sir," he said. He went and found Drecksall and gave him his check. "Go buy yourself some clothes," he said. Drecksall looked at it and gasped.

"Two hundred dollars?"

Wylie nodded. "You're hired. Let's get out of here."

That was only the beginning. Wylie knew an amazing number of people, and before the year was out, Drecksall was nationally known. Money poured in, and, as Wylie was shrewd as well as slick,

he saw to it that Drecksall got plenty. Since there was so much always on hand, Drecksall never questioned the cut that Wylie took, and Wylie was remarkable secretive about where he put his own money.

And one other thing of importance happened.

One afternoon Drecksall hurried home to the apartment he shared with Wylie in Safrisco. It was a quietly elaborate place, and it included the one thing Drecksall demanded—a totally sound-proofed practice room. Flinging open the door, Drecksall was halfway across the sumptuous living room before he quite realized that on entering he had seen someone else in the room. He swung around, staring.

"Hello," said Gretel. She set down her drink and swung her feet off the couch. "Remember me?"

Drecksall nodded silently, watching her, stripping gloves off his hands.

"You're changed," he said after a bit, looking at her clothes, her hair.

"I should be." She smiled vapidly. "I'm married."

"Oh." It penetrated slowly. "Who to?"

"Pascal."

"He—he changed you?"

Gretel's bird-brain manufactured a bird's laugh. "Sure."

"Good God," whispered Drecksall in disgust. He went into his

room and closed the door. He had just begun to hate Wylie.

Gretel picked up her drink again. "He's still crazy," she said.

In nearly all things Vernon Drecksall was as reasonably sane as the rest of us; but he was a monomaniac, and he could hardly be blamed for assuming the things he did. He and his odd conception of Gretel were made for each other. He was the form-fitting husk for his vision of her, and she had filled it completely. She could never do so again, because so much of that vision was composed of sunset gold and purple shadow and that unforgettable tinge of pink when the light shone through her nostril. He could not be expected to understand that. He only knew that the vision didn't fit any more; that something had happened to change her from that utter perfection. And he had her own word for it that Pascal Wylie was that thing. He slumped into the most driving kind of misery. He couldn't see that there was anything he could do about it except to go ahead with his building. Some day he would have her back. Some day she would emerge from his violin in a great bubble of melody which would settle before him, open up and reveal her there as she had been on that summer evening. And she would be his. Toward that iridescent ideal, he strove. Hour upon hour, alone in his sound-proofed cell, he wrought

the Largo. Sometimes he was rewarded by sustained flashes of completion. He had a phrase for her hair, a swift run for her strange eyes as she turned her head, a dazzling contrapuntal passage for the sound of her voice. Each little detail that was mastered was carefully scored, and he would play them jealously now and again, seeing his visions, spurring himself on to represent the duller notes which represented the more prosaic part of the picture—the window-frame behind her, the scratched surface of the old Hammond organ, the crack at the side of her shoe.

During the war, and the ruinous period afterward, he was glad that there was no longer any time for concerts or broadcasts or public appearances, for it left him time to work. Deep in the heart of a half-ruined hotel he labored by candlelight, while the three great counter-revolutions rolled and swirled around his little citadel of silence. Twice he saw Pascal Wylie in a gibbering state of fear; both times he had thrown him bodily out of his practice room, ignoring his pleading and his warning that they were all going to be shot. Wylie was in politics up to his ears and over, though fortunately for him he had stayed in the background and let dollars speak for him. When it was all over and the exhausted world began to build again, Drecksall was possibly the only man alive

who neither knew nor cared what had happened. He had been touched by it too; his investments were completely wiped out, but that meant nothing to him. He was certain that there would be more and he was right. The Great Change was on, and with the nation's rebirth there was plenty for such as he.

And so the years swept by him as had the violence of war and revolution and renaissance. Time left him alone, and it was with something of a shock that Wylie, during that rocky period, realized that the strange creature was the only solid, unchanging thing in the universe. Gretel changed by the day, for hers was the scintillant peasant beauty that fades early. She gave every promise of finally occupying some chimney-corner until she grew into a gargoyle and became part of the mantel. Wylie cared for her casually from force of habit, and bent his efforts to rebuilding his fortune. And Drecksall played.

Something else was creeping into the building of the Largo. The central theme itself, that breathing, mutant reproduction of Gretel, was being framed in a darker, deeper mass of tones. It was a thing like hatred, like vengeance, that frame. It was Pascal Wylie, and it wound round and about the thing that was Gretel. This was not mere music. This was something more definite than even Drecksall's crazed kind of

music. It was the outline, the detailed description, of a definite plan of action. The same impulse that drove him to do something about his vanished Gretel was forcing him to deal, in his own way, with Wylie.

There came a time when Drecksall felt that the Largo was nearly complete. It would need more than scoring for the composition to be fully rounded. It would need an audience, and it would need a setting. It couldn't be played in any ordinary concert hall, nor in the open air. For its full effect, it must needs be played in an auditorium built for it, and it alone.

A building like that never existed, nor did Drecksall expect it to. He built it himself. It took two years or more. It cost thousands—so much, indeed, that he went to Wylie for more; and Wylie, fearing that he would begin asking questions, gave him more and more of his own earnings, telling him blandly that theater managers and the broadcasting chains were paying more these days. Drecksall didn't care, as long as he got enough for his purpose.

He had no end of trouble. It was months before he found an engineer who would dare attempt the auditorium, more months before he found one who could be convinced that he meant what he said when he gave his specifications. They were to be followed to the thousandth of a millimeter,

and Drecksall's rages when he saw tiny variations on the blueprints were really beautiful to behold. In time, the indignant words, "After all, Mr. Drecksall, I'm a graduate engineer, and while you may be the world's foremost violinist, you are not qualified to—" became real poison to him. After breaking up a few expensive violins and accessories over their erudite heads, he gave up personal visits from architects and contractors and handled the thing vitriolically, by mail.

But when the auditorium was finished, it was what he had ordered, from the bedrock and soil he had specified to the top of the heavy square tower. It was certainly a strange affair. It was not very large, and looked like the conventionalized nose of a space cruiser. Its walls were thin at the bottom, thick and massive at its domed top. Inside, the basic construction was easily seen. It was made of thirty-eight arches all joining at the top and forming the circular walls at the sides and base. The tower was squat and massive; solid, steel-reinforced concrete. There were no windows, and the door was self-sealing, an integral part of its wall. It was lighted from a fixture which also was built into the contours of the wall. The only thing that detracted from that symphony of metrical lines on the interior wall was a heavy concrete block that jutted out over a stone chair—

high over it. On the other side of the chamber was another such chair, but the wall over it was like all the others. At the exact center of the building was a tiny red tile, set into the floor, and this was the only indication of a stage, a place from which to perform. It was certainly a strange creation; but then, it had been built for a strange purpose.

Drecksall made his demands several weeks before he intended to play the Largo, because he expected resistance. He got it. Wylie failed to see why he should sit through a highly involved musical masterpiece when he had never cared particularly for music; why he should go out into the wilds, miles from the nearest city, to hear it; why it couldn't be played in the apartment or at their country place; and most particularly, why he should rouse Gretel from the intellectual stupor she had fallen into these last years and drag her out there to the auditorium. Drecksall heard him out patiently, said, "It really isn't much to ask," and left the room. He was back in a moment with his concert violin which he wrapped carefully in a plexiskin and put away in its case. "I'm not going to play again," he said quietly, "until I play the Largo for you and Gretel, in my auditorium." Then, leaving Wylie to give puzzled shrugs at the violin-case, he went out.

It took just forty-eight hours

for Wylie to discover that Drecksall was really serious, for it was that long before the violinist had an engagement. Wylie got into his soup and fish, went to call Drecksall, and found him sprawled on the couch of his practice room. He refused to go. Fuming, Wylie canceled the concert. He didn't give in on that occasion, nor on the next, but when he read a note on one of the facsimiles to the effect that the Old Master was at long last developing temperment, and that perhaps the word "maybe" should be inserted before the date of each of his scheduled concerts, Wylie broke down, at last asking himself why he had made an issue of it at all. Drecksall had been easy enough to get along with.

And at long last they hired a helicopter and whirled the long miles out to the auditorium. As they landed, Wylie broke his glum silence to ask, "How long'll we be here?"

"I couldn't say," grinned Drecksall happily.

"How long will it take to play the thing?"

"Shall I tell him to come back in about that time?" asked Wylie, nodding toward the cab-driver.

Drecksall alighted from the cab and helped Gretel out. "If you like," he said.

The plane shot away and they walked up the rough trail toward

the auditorium. "That the place?" asked Wylie.

"That's the place."

Wylie looked at it. "Hell! What did you go and spend all that jack on that place for? Why it wouldn't hold fifty people!"

"It wasn't meant to," said Drecksall gently.

They reached the door—that is, the point where the path ended against the wall. Drecksall paused and looked at them.

"You have a hard collar on," he said. "Take it off."

"Take—what for?"

"This building is the last word—*my* last word—in acoustics. I can't have anything spoiling it." He looked at Gretel. She was standing there, uncomplaining as ever. "Tell her to take off those stockings, too. They're sheet plastic, and might echo."

Wylie glanced over his shoulder at the speck that was the retreating helicopter, shrugged, and took off his collar. "Take your stockings off," he said to Gretel.

The spasm that signified mental activity crossed Gretel's bland face. "He's crazy," she said, looking at Drecksall.

"You're kiddin'," said Wylie, "Go on—take 'em off."

Once that was disposed of, Drecksall opened the door and followed them in. He turned on the lights, closed the door. "Sit over there," he said to Wylie, indicating the stone seat under the jutting block. He led Gretel

over to the other chair. Then he took his violin out and put the case into a recess in the wall. A panel slid over it.

"This is a looney sort of place," said Wylie. His voice echoed so that it hurt his ears. For his own comfort, he whispered. "What gave you the idea for it?"

Drecksall stopped rubbing his bow with rosin to stare at his manager. 'What gave me the idea? Study, you fool. Years of it. Infinite patience in going into the laws and phenomena and—and tricks of acoustics. Be quiet. I'm going to play."

He snuggled the tail of the violin into the hollow of his throat, bowed the open strings, flattened one of them microscopically. Then, without another word, he began to play.

Little else could be said here than that he played his *Largo*. It began stridently, weaving that dreadful flaming frame for the vision of Gretel; and Wylie was whisked deep into it. One part of his brain ticked busily away, still wondering about this auditorium, the fact that it was built for an audience of two, the surprise in discovering that for years Drecksall had had a secret activity, the realization that the acoustics of the place were indeed amazing. The notes spread out from his inspired violin were gathered at the top of the dome and hurled back with a force that made the building tremble. Yes, the building

echoed; soon, it had far more echoed sound in it than original, so that Drecksall could slip into a thin, sweet piping and be accompanied by a tumultuous background of sound that he had created long seconds before.

The music suddenly took an ear-shattering turn, and then began a theme—a theme that caught both Wylie and the comatose Gretel the same way, made them both stretch their memories back and back until they settled on a dark lake. They saw again a figure on a rock, pressing notes out through the warm air on a hilltop lake. The same theme—and then again that crashing series of bass runs; and then, before the listeners had time to be startled by it, that almost telepathic theme again. Back and back again he returned to it, the roar of the bass strings and the compelling measures of the memory theme; and always they were faster, and louder, and closer together. They blended finally into a great crescendo, a monster welling of sound that gathered in the dome and came crashing down, pressing the stong block away from the wall, sending its massive tons down on Pascal Wylie. Its crash was symphonic, precisely blended with the mood and rhythm of the music; and as the echoes died away, that whole section of the floor sank out of sight, bearing Wylie's crushed body and the pile of rubble that hid it; and a panel slid

across the opening. Now the auditorium was acoustically perfect for the greater task.

Gretel sat in a paralysis of fear, and Drecksall played earnestly on. This part of the Largo was justice. He had long wanted to kill Wylie because Wylie, he felt, had killed the Gretel he pictured. But artistic integrity forbade the use of any weapon but music.

And now began the recreation of his old, old vision. He did not look at the unmoving Gretel, but sketched in the essentials of his tone-portrait, and then went over them and over them, filling in. He never lost sight of the shades he had already drawn, but all the while he strove for more and more perfect completion. Even Gretel began to see it. The music moved, with mechanical perfection, across her mental screen, burning indelibly wherever it touched. It moved with speed, slowly, the way the darting photo-electric beam slowly draws a transmitted photograph. It moved as indirectly and as purposefully and as implacably.

The laboring strings hummed and crackled, and Drecksall's fingers were a blur. Gretel, shockingly, felt the fabric of the clothes she had worn that day, all over her body; she felt the warmth of the setting sun on her back, and her lips began to move in the words she had spoken then, so vivid was the music.

And then, shrilly, the thing was complete. The picture was there sustained by one thin, high note that fell and fell until it became low and vibrant and infinitely compelling. It continued unbearably, filling the room, filling it again at twice the pressure, again and again. A trickle of powdered stone came down from the tower's base, and then the tortured stone could stand no more. The upper walls cracked and the tower burst through.

As it did, Vernon Drecksall saw and claimed his reward. The mass of masonry opened high over his head and a shaft of golden sunlight speared through, and in the roaring, dust-filled auditorium Gretel sat spotlighted. Her pose, her hair, her very expression, were, to his crazed and triumphant mind, the Largo, come alive. With a glad cry he hurled his violin away and caught her in his arms on the very instant that the great tower crushed down on them both. He had his revenge, and he had his consummation.

The chandeliers on the eighty-first floor of the Empire State Building swung wildly without any reason. A company of soldiers marched over a new, well-built bridge, and it collapsed. Enrico Caruso filled his lungs and sang, and the crystal glass before him shattered.

And Vernon Drecksall composed his Largo.

The End

"Save it for the report, Suzie!" That was the woman with the recorder.

Report? Dasein asked himself. *What report?*

He swept his gaze around the room. A row of filing cabinets stood against the far wall. He could just see the edge of a couch directly under the window. A pull-down stairway of the type used for access to attics occupied the corner at the left. There were two typewriters on wheeled stands behind the women.

Dasein decided it was one of the most peculiar rooms he had ever seen. Here were all the fixtures of normalcy, but with that odd Santaroga twist to them. Why the secrecy? Why eight TV receivers? What was in the filing cabinets?

What report?

From time to time, the women made notes, used the recorder, switched channels. All the time, they carried on casual conversations only parts of which were audible to Dasein. None of it made much sense—small talk: "I decided against putting in pleats; they're so much trouble." "If Fred can't pick me up after work, I'll need a ride to town."

His exposed position on the roof began to bother Dasein. He told himself there was nothing else to be learned from a vigil at the window. What explanation could he give if he were caught here?

Carefully, he worked his way back to his room, climbed in, closed the window. Again, he checked the hall. There just was no door into that strange room at this level. He walked down to the exit sign, opened a narrow door onto a back landing. An open stairway with doweled railing, looked down two stories to a basement level. He looked up. The stair well was open to a skylight above the third floor.

Moving quietly, he climbed to the next level, opened the landing door onto another hall. He stepped in, looked at the wall above the secret room. Two steps from the landing there was another door labeled "Linen Supplies." Dasein tried the handle — locked.

Frustrated, he turned back to the landing. As he stepped from the hall, his right foot caught on a loose edge of carpeting. In one terrifying instant, Dasein saw the railing and the open stairwell flash toward him. His right shoulder hit the rail with a splintering crash, slowing his fall but not stopping it. He clutched at the broken rail with his left hand, felt it bend out, knew then that he was going over — three stories down to the basement. The broken rail in his hand made a screeching sound as it bent outward. It all seemed to be happening in a terrible slow motion. He could see the edges of the descending stairway where they had been painted, and the paint had run

in little yellow lines. He saw a cobweb beneath one of the risers, a ball of maroon lint caught in it.

The broken rail came free in one last splintering crack and Dasein went over. In this deadly instant, as he saw in his mind his own body splattered on the concrete three floors down, strong hands grabbed his ankles. Not quite realizing what had happened, Dasein swung head down, released the broken rail and saw it turn and twist downward.

He felt himself being pulled upward like a doll, dragged against the broken edges of the railing, turned over onto his back on the landing.

Dasein found himself looking up into the scowling black face of Win Burdeaux.

"That were a mighty close one, sir," Burdeaux said.

Dasein was gasping so hard he couldn't answer. His right shoulder felt like a giant ball of pain. The fingers of his left hand were bent inward with an agonizing cramp from the strength with which he had gripped the rail.

"I heard someone try the supply closet door," Burdeaux said. "I was in there, sir, and I came out. There you were going through the railing, sir. How did that happen?"

"Carpet," Dasein gasped. "Tripped."

Burdeaux bent to examine the area at the landing door. He straightened, said: "I'll be bless-

ed if that carpet isn't torn there, sir. That's a very dangerous situation."

Dasein managed to straighten his cramped fingers. He took a deep breath, tried to sit up. Burdeaux helped him. Dasein noted that his shirt was torn. There was a long red scratch on his stomach and chest from being dragged across the broken rail.

"You best take it easy for a few minutes, sir," Burdeaux said. "You want for me to call the doctor?"

"No . . . no, thank you."

"It wouldn't take but a minute, sir."

"I'll . . . be all right."

Dasein looked at the torn carpet, a jagged edge of maroon fabric. He remembered the piece of railing as it had tumbled away into the stair well and found it strange that he had no recollection of hearing the thing hit the bottom. There was another picture in his mind, equally disturbing: the fatal accidents of the two previous investigators. Dasein pictured himself dead at the bottom of that stair well, the investigation — all very natural, regrettable, but natural. Such things happened.

But were they accidents?

His shoulder was beginning to throb.

"I'd better get down to my room . . . and change," Dasein said. The pain in his shoulder, intense now, told him he had to

have medical attention. He could feel some instinct in himself fighting the idea, though, even as he struggled upright.

Burdeaux reached out to help him to his feet, but Dasein pulled away, knowing the irrationality of the act as he did it.

"Sir, I mean you no harm," Burdeaux said. There was a gentle chiding in the tone.

Was my fear of him that obvious? Dasein asked himself.

He remembered then the strong hands grabbing his ankles, the lifesaving catch at the brink of the stairwell. A feeling of apology overcame Dasein.

"I . . . know you don't," he said. "You saved my life. There aren't words to thank you for that. I . . . was thinking about the broken rail. Shouldn't you see about fixing that?"

Using the wall as a support, Dasein gained his feet. He stood there panting. The shoulder was a massive agony.

"I will lock this door here, sir," Burdeaux said, his voice gentle, but firm. "I am going to call the doctor, sir. You are favoring your shoulder. I suspect there is much pain in it. Best the doctor see you, sir."

Dasein turned away, wondering at his own ambivalence. A doctor had to see the shoulder—yes. But did it have to be Piaget? Hugging the wall for support, Dasein moved down the steps. Piaget . . . Piaget . . .

Piaget. Had Piaget been called on the two fatal accidents? Movement sent fiery pain through the shoulder. Piaget . . . Piaget . . . How could this incident on the stairs have been anything except an accident? Who could have predicted he'd be in that particular place at that particular moment?

There came the sound of the door being closed and latched above him. Burdeaux's heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. Dasein clutched the shoulder, paused on the second floor landing.

"Sir?"

Dasein turned, looked up at the dark Moorish face, noting the expression of concern.

"It would be best, sir," Burdeaux said, "if you do not go out on the roof again. You may be subject to falls, sir. A fall from that roof would be very dangerous."

The rainstorm hit the valley just before dark. Dasein was settled into a heavy old-fashioned chair in the Piaget house by then, his shoulder immobilized by a firm bandage, Jenny sitting across from him on a hassock, an accusing look on her face.

A gentle, unswerving Burdeaux had driven him to the clinic adjoining Piaget's house and had seen him into the antiseptic atmosphere of a tiled emergency room before leaving.

Dasein didn't know what he'd expected — certainly not the cold professional detachment with which Piaget had set about treating the shoulder.

"Torn ligaments and a slight dislocation," Piaget had said. "What were you trying to do—commit suicide?"

Dasein winced as a bandage was drawn tightly into place. "Where's Jenny?"

"Helping with dinner. We'll tell her about your damn' foolishness after we have you repaired." Piaget secured the end of a bandage. "You haven't told me what you were up to."

"I was snooping!" Dasein growled.

"Were you now?" He adjusted a sling around Dasein's neck, set it to immobilize the arm. "There, that should hold you for awhile. Don't move that arm any more than you have to. I guess I don't have to tell you that. Leave your coat off. There's a covered walkway to the house — right through that door. Go on in and I'll send Jenny to entertain you until dinner."

The covered walkway had glass sides and was lined with potted geraniums. The storm struck as Dasein was making his way between the pots, and he paused a moment to look out at a new mown lawn, rows of standard roses, a lowering blue-gray sky. The wind whipped rain down a street beyond the roses, bending

the branches of a line of white birches. There were people hurrying along the sidewalk beside the birches. The damp hems of their coats lashed their legs in each gust.

Dasein felt a bit lightheaded, chilled in spite of the walkway's protection. *What am I doing here?* he asked himself. He swallowed in a dry throat, hurried on to the door of the house and into a paneled living room full of big furniture. There was the faint smell of a coal fire in the room. His shoulder was a place of dull throbbing. He made his way across the room, past a sideboard full of massive cut glass pieces, lowered himself carefully into a deep, soft chair of corded green upholstery.

The lack of movement and its temporary easing of pain filled him with a momentary sense of relief. Then the shoulder began throbbing again.

A door slammed — hurrying feet.

Jenny burst upon him through a wide archway to the left. Her face was flushed. A damp wisp of hair strayed at her temple. She was wearing a simple orange dress, a shocking splash of color in the dull tones of the big room. With an odd sense of detachment, Dasein remembered telling her once that orange was his favorite color. The memory filled him with an unexplainable wariness.

"Gil, for heaven's sake!" she said, stopping in front of him, hands on hips.

Dasein swallowed.

Jenny looked at his open shirt, the edge of bandages, the sling. Abruptly, she dropped to her knees, put her head in his lap, clutching at him, and he saw she was crying — silent tears that spread shiny dampness across her cheeks.

"Hey!" Dasein said. "Jenny . . ." The tears, the lack of contortion in her face — he found it embarrassing. She filled him with a sense of guilt, as though he'd betrayed her in some way. The feeling overrode his pain and fatigue.

Jenny took his left hand, pressed her cheek against it. "Gil," she whispered. "Let's get married — right away."

Why not? he wondered. But the guilt remained . . . and the unanswered questions. Was Jenny bait in a trap that had been set for him? Would she even know it if she were? Did the worm know it was impaled on the hook to lure the trout?

A soft cough sounded from the archway to Dasein's left.

Jenny pulled back, but still held his hand.

Dasein looked up to find Piaget there. The man had changed to a blue smoking jacket that made him look even more the man made him look even more the mandarin. The big head was tip-

ped slightly to the right with an air of amusement, but the dark eyes stared out speculatively.

Behind Piaget, amber wall sconces had been turned on in a dining room. Dasein could see a large oval table set with three places on white linen, the gleam of silver and crystal.

"Jenny?" Piaget said.

She sighed, released Dasein's hand, retreated to the green ottoman, sat down with her legs curled under her.

Dasein grew aware of the smell of roasting meat savory with garlic. It made him acutely aware of hunger. In the heightening of his senses, he detected an enticing tang, recognized the *Jaspers* odor.

"I think we should discuss your susceptibility to accidents," Piaget said. "Do you mind, Gilbert?"

"By all means," Dasein said. He sat watching the doctor carefully. There was an edge of caution in Piaget's voice, a hesitancy that went beyond a host's reluctance to engage in an embarrassing conversation.

"Have you had many painful accidents?" Piaget asked. He strode across the room as he spoke, crossing to a quilted leather chair behind Jenny. When he sat, he was looking across Jenny's shoulder at Dasein, and Dasein had the abrupt suspicion that this position had been chosen with care. It aligned Piaget and Jenny against him.

"Well?" Piaget asked.

"Why don't we trade answers?"

Dasein countered. "You answer a question for me, and I answer a question for you."

"Oh?" Piaget's face relaxed into the bemused smile of a private joke.

Jenny looked worried.

"What's your question?" Piaget asked.

"A bargain's a bargain," Dasein said. "First, an answer. You ask if I've been involved in many accidents. No, I have not. That is, not before coming here. I can recall one other — a fall from an apple tree when I was eight."

"So," Piaget said. "Now, you have a question for me."

Jenny frowned, looked away.

Dasein felt a sudden dryness in his throat, found his voice rasping when he spoke: "Tell me, Doctor — how did the two investigators die — the ones who came before me?"

Jenny's head snapped around. "Gil!" There was outrage in her voice.

"Easy, Jenny," Piaget said. A nerve began ticking on the broad plane of his left cheek. "You're on the wrong track, young man," he growled. "We're not savages here. There's no need. If we want someone to leave, he leaves."

"And you don't want me to leave?"

"Jenny doesn't want you to leave. And that's two questions

from you. You owe me an answer."

Dasein nodded. He stared across Jenny at Piaget, reluctant to look at her.

"Do you love, Jenny?" Piaget asked.

Dasein swallowed, lowered his gaze to meet a pleading stare in Jenny's eyes. Piaget knew the answer to that question! Why did he ask it now?

"You know I do," Dasein said.

Jenny smiled, but two bright tears beaded her eyelashes.

"Then why did you wait a year to come up here and tell her so?" Piaget asked. There was an angry, accusatory bite in his voice that made Dasein stiffen.

Jenny turned, stared at her uncle. Her shoulders trembled.

"Because I'm a damn' stubborn fool," Dasein said. "I don't want the woman I love to tell me where I have to live."

"So you don't like our valley," Piaget said. "Maybe we can change your opinion about that. You willing to let us try?"

No! Dasein thought. *I'm not willing!* But he knew this answer, visceral and instinctive, would come out petulant, childish. "Do your damndest," he muttered.

And Dasein wondered at himself. What were his instincts telling him? What was wrong with this valley that put him on guard at every turn?

"Dinner's ready."

It was a woman's voice from the

archway at the end of the room.

Dasein turned to find a gaunt grey female in a grey dress standing there. She was a Grant Woods early-American come to life, long-nosed, wary of eye, disapproving in every line of her face.

"Thank you, Sarah," Piaget said. "This is Dr. Dasein, Jenny's young man."

Her eyes weighed Dasein, found him wanting. "The food's getting cold," she said.

Piaget lifted himself out of his chair. "Sarah's my cousin," he said. "She comes from the old Yankee side of the family and absolutely refuses to dine with us if we eat at a fashionable hour."

"Damn' foolishness; the hours you keep," she muttered. "My father was always in bed by this time."

"And up at dawn," Piaget said.

"Don't you try to make fun of me, Larry Piaget," she said. She turned away. "Come to table. I'll bring the roast."

Jenny crossed to Dasein, helped him to his feet. She leaned close, kissed his cheek, whispered: "She really likes you. She told me so in the kitchen."

"What're you two whispering?" Piaget demanded.

"I was telling Gil what Sarah said about him."

"Oh, what's Sarah say?"

"She said: 'Larry isn't going to browbeat that young man. He has eyes like Grandpa Sather.'"

Piaget turned to study Dasein.

"By George, he has." "I hadn't noticed." He turned away with an abrupt cutting-off motion, led the way into the dining room. "Come along, or Sarah will change her good opinion. We can't have that."

To Dasein, it was one of the strangest dinners of his life. There was the pain of his injured shoulder, a steady throb that impelled him to an alertness that made every word and motion stand out in sharp relief. There was Jenny—she had never looked more warmly feminine and desirable. There was Piaget, who declared a conversational truce for the meal and plied Dasein with questions about his courses at the University, the professors, fellow students, his ambitions. There was Sarah, hovering with the food—a muttering specter who had soft looks only for Jenny.

With Sarah, it's what Jenny wants, Jenny gets, Dasein thought.

Finally, there was the food: a rib roast cooked to a medium rare perfection, the Jaspers sauce over peas and potato pancakes, the local beer with its palate-cleansing tang, and fresh peaches with honey for dessert.

Beer with dinner struck Dasein as strange at first until he experienced the play of tastes, a subtle mingling of flavor esters that made individual savors stand out on his tongue even as they were combining to produce

entirely new sensations. It was a crossing of senses, he realized—smells tasted, colors amplifying the aromas.

At the first serving of beer, Piaget had tasted it, nodded. "Fresh," he said.

"Within the hour just like you ordered," Sarah snapped. And she'd cast a strange probing stare at Dasein.

It was shortly after 9:30 when Dasein left.

"I had your truck brought around," Piaget said. "Think you can drive it, or shall I have Jenny take you back to the hotel?"

"I'll be all right," Dasein said.

"Don't take those pain pills I gave you until you're safely in your room," Piaget said. "Don't want you running off the road."

They stood on the broad verandah at the front of the house then, street lights casting wet shadows of the birches onto the lawn. The rain had stopped, but there was a chilled feeling of dampness in the night air.

Jenny had thrown his coat around his shoulders. She stood beside him, a worried frown on her face. "Are you *sure* you'll be all right?"

"You ought to know I can steer with one hand," he said. He grinned at her.

"Sometimes I think you're a terrible man," she said. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"It's chemistry," he said.

Piaget cleared his throat. "Tell me, Gilbert," he said. "What *were* you doing on that hotel roof?"

Dasein felt an abrupt pang of fear, a sense of incongruity in the timing of that question.

What the hell! he thought. *Let's see what a straight answer does.*

"I was trying to find out why you're so all-fired secret about your TV," he said.

"Secret?" Piaget shook his head. "That's just a pet project of mine. They're analyzing the silly infantilisms of TV, producing data for a book I have in mind."

"Then why so secret?" Dasein felt Jenny clutching his arm, ignored the fear he sensed in her reaction.

"It's consideration for the sensibilities of others, not secrecy," Piaget said. "Most TV drives our people wild. We monitor the news, of course, but even that is mostly pap, sugar-coated and spoon-fed."

There was a ring of partial truth in Piaget's explanation, Dasein felt, but he wondered what was being left out. What else were those women *researching* in that room.

"I see," Dasein said.

"You owe me an answer now," Piaget said.

"Fire away."

"Another time," Piaget said.

"I'll leave you two to say good-night, now."

He went inside, closed the door.

Presently, Dasein was headed down the street in his truck, the tingling sensation of Jenny's kiss still warm on his lips.

He arrived at the wye intersection to the hotel shortly before ten, hesitated, then bore to the right on the road out of the valley to Porterville. There was an odd feeling of self-preservation in the decision, but he told himself it was just because he wanted to drive for awhile . . . and think.

What is happening to me? he wondered. His mind felt abnormally clear, but he was enveloped by such a feeling of disquiet that his stomach was knotted with it. There was an odd broadening to his sense of being. It made him realize that he had forced himself inward with his concentration of psychology, that he had narrowed his world. Something was pushing at his self-imposed barriers now, and he sensed things lurking *beyond*, things which he feared.

Why am I here? he asked himself.

He could trace a chain of cause and effect back to the university, to Jenny . . . but again he felt the interference of things outside this chain and he feared these things.

The night sped past his truck, and he realized he was fleeing up the mountain, trying to escape the valley.

He thought of Jenny as she'd appeared this night: an elf in orange dress and orange shoes,

lovely Jenny dressed to please him, her sincerity and love all transparent on her face.

Bits and pieces of the dinner conversation began coming back to him. *Jaspers*. "This is the old Jaspers—deep." That had been Jenny tasting the sauce. "Almost time to put down a new section of Jaspers in number five." That had been Sarah bringing in the dessert. And Piaget: "I'll talk to the boys about it tomorrow."

Now, recalling this, Dasein realized there'd been a faint, familiar tang even in the honey. He wondered then about the way *Jaspers* figured so often in their conversations. They never strayed far from it, seemed to find nothing unusual in the constancy of it. They talked Jaspers . . . and at the oddest moments.

He was at the pass out of the valley now, trembling with an ambivalent feeling of escape . . . and of loss.

There'd been a fire across the slopes through which Dasein was now descending. He smelled damp ashes on the wind that whipped through the ventilators, recalled the reported trouble with telephone lines. Clouds had begun to clear away here outside the valley. Dead trees stood out on the burned slopes like Chinese characters brushstroked on the moonlighted hills.

Abruptly, his mind clamped on a logical reason for coming out of the valley: *The telephone! I*

have to call Selador and confer. There are no lines out of the valley, but I can call from Porterville . . . before I go back.

He drove steadily then, his being suspended, static, held in a curious lack of emotion—nothing on his mind. Even the pain in his shoulder faded.

Porterville loomed out of the night, the highway becoming a wide main street with a blue and white "Bus Depot" sign on the left over an all-night cafe—two big truck-trailer rigs there beside a little convertible and a green and white Sheriff's car. An orange glow across the street was "Frenchy's Mother Lode Saloon." The cars at the curb conveyed a general decrepit look, depressingly alike in their battered oldness.

Dasein drove past, found a lonely phone booth beneath a street light at the corner of a darkened Shell station. He turned in, stopped beside the booth. The truck's engine was hot and tried to go on running with a clunking, jerking motion after he shut off the ignition. He stopped the motion with the clutch, sat for a moment looking at the booth. Presently, he got out. The truck creaked with distress at his movement.

The Sheriff's car drove past, its headlights casting enormous shadows on a white fence behind the phone booth.

Dasein sighed, went into the booth. He felt strangely reluctant

to make the call, had to force himself.

Presently, Selador's precise accent came on the line: "Gilbert? Is that you, Gilbert? Have they repaired the deuced telephone lines?"

"I'm calling from Porterville, just outside the valley."

"Is something wrong, Gilbert?"

Dasein swallowed. Even at long distance, Selador managed to remain perceptive. *Something wrong?* Dasein delivered a brief recital of his accidents.

After a prolonged silence, Selador said: "That's very odd, Gilbert, but I fail to see how you can construe these incidents as other than accidents. With the gas, for example, they put out a great effort to save you. And your tumble—how could anyone possibly have known you'd be the one to pass that way?"

"I just wanted you to know about them," Dasein said. "Piaget think's I'm accident prone."

"Piaget? Oh, yes—the local doctor. Well, Gilbert, one should always discount pronouncements that go outside one's specialty. I doubt Piaget's qualified to diagnose an accident prone, even if there were such a syndrome—which I sincerely doubt." Selador cleared his throat. "You don't seriously think these people have malignant designs against you?"

Selador's sane, level tones had a soothing effect on Dasein. He was right, of course. Here, re-

moved from the valley, the events of the past twenty-four hours took on a different shade of meaning.

"Of course not," Dasein said.

"Good! You've always struck me as a very level head, Gilbert. Let me caution you now that you may have intruded upon a situation where people are being genuinely careless. Under those circumstances, the Inn might be an extremely dangerous place, and you should leave."

"To go where?" Dasein asked.

"There must be some other accommodations."

Carelessness at the Inn? Dasein wondered. Then why were no others injured? A dangerous place, yes—but only because it was part of the valley. He felt a strong reluctance to agree with Selador. It was as though his own reluctance were based on data unavailable to Selador.

Abruptly, Dasein saw how the loose carpet could have been aimed at him. He thought of a baited trap. The bait? That was the TV room, of course—an odd place certain to arouse his curiosity. Around the bait would be several traps, all avenues covered. He wondered what trap he had missed on the roof. As he thought about it, Dasein recalled how the stair rail had broken.

"Are you there, Gilbert?"

Selador's voice sounded thin and distant.

"Yes—I'm here."

Dasein nodded to himself. It

was so beautifully simple. It answered all the vague uneasiness that had plagued him about the accidents. So simple—like a child's drawing on a steamy window: no excess lines or unnecessary data. Bait and traps.

Even as he saw it, Dasein realized Selador wouldn't accept this solution. It smacked of paranoia. If the theory were wrong, it would be paranoid. It implied organization, the involvement of many people, many officials.

"Is there something else you wanted, Gilbert? We're paying for some rather costly silence."

Dasein came to himself suddenly. "Yes, sir. You recall Piaget's article about Santarogans and allergens?"

"Quite." Selador cleared his throat.

"I want you to query the public health officials and the Department of Agriculture. Find out if they have chemical analyses of the valley's farm products—including the cheese."

"Public health . . . agriculture . . . cheese," Selador said.

Dasein could almost see him making notes. "Anything more?"

"Perhaps. Could you get to the attorneys for the real estate board and the chain store people? I'm sure they must've explored possibilities of legal recourse on the leased land they . . ."

"What're you driving at, Gilbert?"

"The chain stores leased the

property and built their expensive installations before discovering the Santarogans wouldn't trade with them. Is this a pattern? Do Santaroga realtors trap unwary outsiders?"

"Conspiracy to defraud," Selador said. "I see. I'm rather inclined to believe, Gilbert, that this avenue already has been exhausted."

Hearing him, Dasein thought Selador's usual acuteness had been blunted. Perhaps he was tired.

"Most likely," Dasein said. "It wouldn't hurt, though, for me to see what the legal eagles were thinking. I might get some new clues on the scene."

"Very well. And, Gilbert, when are you going to send me copies of your notes?"

"I'll mail some carbons tonight from Porterville."

"Tomorrow will be all right. It's getting late and . . ."

"No, sir."

Dasein recounted Jenny's anger at the women in the Santaroga post office. Selador chuckled.

"They sound like a veritable band of harpies," Selador said. "Aren't there laws against tampering with the mails? But, of course, determined people and all that. I hope you found Miss Sorge in good health."

"As beautiful as ever," Dasein said, keeping his voice light. He wondered suddenly about Sela-

dor. Miss Sorge. No hesitation, no question at all about her being unmarried.

"We're exploring the source of their petrol supply," Selador said. "Nothing on that yet. Take care of yourself, Gilbert. I shouldn't want anything to happen to you."

"That makes two of us," Dasein said.

"Goodbye, then," Selador said. His voice sounded hesitant. A click signalled the breaking of the connection.

Dasein hung up, turned at a sound behind him. Sheriff's car was pulling into the station. It stopped facing the booth. A spotlight flashed in Dasein's eyes. He heard a door open, footsteps.

"Turn that damn' light out of my eyes!" Dasein said.

The light was lowered. He discerned a bulky shape in uniform standing outside the booth, the gleam of a badge.

"Anything wrong?" It was an oddly squeaky voice to come from that bulk.

Dasein stepped out of the booth, still angry at the way they had flashed the light in his eyes. "Should there be?"

"You damn' Santarogans," the deputy muttered. "Must be important for one of you to come over to make a phone call."

Dasein started to protest he wasn't a Santarogan, remained silent as his mind was caught by a flow of questions. What made outsiders assume he was a San-

tarogan? The fat man in the Chrysler and now this deputy. Dasein recalled Marden's words. What was the identifying tag?

"If you're through, you best be getting home," the deputy said. "Can't park here all night."

Dasein saw an abrupt mental image of his gas gauge—it was faulty and registered almost empty even when the tank was full. Would they believe he had to wait for the station to open in the morning? What if they roused an attendant and found his tank took only a few gallons?

Why am I debating petty deceptions? Dasein wondered.

It occurred to him that he was reluctant to return to Santaroga. Why? Was living in the valley turning him into a Santarogan?

"That's a real artistic bandage you're wearing," the deputy said. "Been in an accident?"

"Nothing important," Dasein said. "Strained some ligaments."

"Good night, then," the deputy said. "Take it easy on that road." He returned to his car, said something in a low voice to his companion. They chuckled. The car pulled slowly out of the station.

They mistook me for a Santarogan, Dasein thought, and he considered the reactions which had accompanied that mistake. They'd resented his presence here, but with an odd kind of diffidence . . . as though they were afraid of him. They hadn't hesitated to leave him alone here,

though—no question of his being a criminal.

Disturbed by the incident and unable to explain his disturbance, Dasein climbed back into his truck, headed for Santaroga.

Why had they assumed he was a Santarogan? The question kept gnawing at him.

A bump in the road made him acutely conscious of his shoulder. The pain had settled into a dull ache. His mind felt clear and alert, though, poised on a knife-edge peak of observation. He began to wonder about this sensation as he drove.

The road flowed beneath him, climbing . . . climbing . . .

As though part of the road's pattern, disconnected images began flowing through his mind. They came with words and phrases, madly jumbled, no thought of order. Meaning eluded him. Feeling suddenly light-headed, he tried to grapple with the sensations—

Cave . . . limping man . . . fire . . .

What cave? he wondered. *Where have I seen a limping man? What fire? Is it the fire that destroyed the telephone lines?*

He had the sudden impression that he was the limping man. Fire and cave eluded him.

Dasein felt he wasn't reasoning, but was pawing through old thoughts. Images—labels summoned objects before his mind's

eye: *Car*. He saw Jersey Hofstedder's polished old machine. *Fence*. He saw the chain-link fence around the Co-op. *Shadows*. He saw bodiless shadows.

What's happening to me?

He felt trembly with hunger . . . sweaty. Perspiration rolled off his forehead and cheeks. He tasted it on his lips. Dasein opened his window, allowed the cold wind to whip around him.

At the turn-off where he'd stopped the first evening, Dasein pulled onto the gravel, shut off engine and lights. The clouds were gone and an oblate silver moon rode low on the horizon. He stared down into the valley—widely spaced lights, blue-green from the greenhouses far to his left, the bustle and stir from the Co-op off to the right.

Up here, Dasein felt removed from all that, isolated. The darkness enclosed him.

Cave? he wondered.

Jaspers?

It was difficult to think with his body behaving in this oddly erratic fashion. His shoulder throbbed. There was a nodule of aching in his left lung. He was aware of a tendon in his left ankle—not pain, but a knowledge of a weakness there. He could trace in his mind the fiery line of scratches down his chest where Burdeaux had dragged him across the broken bannisters.

A picture of the map on George Nis's wall flashed into his mind,

was gone with a wavering flick.

He felt *possessed*. Something had taken over his body. It was an ancient, frightening thought. Mad. He gripped the steering wheel, imagined that it writhed, jerked his hands away.

His throat was dry.

Dasein took his own pulse, staring at the luminous dial on his wristwatch. The second hand jumped oddly. It was either that or his pulse was rapid and erratic. Something was distorting his time sense.

Have I been poisoned? he wondered. *Was there something in Piaget's dinner? Plomaine?*

The black bowl of the valley was a forbidding hand that could reach up and grab him.

Jaspers, he thought. *Jaspers*. What did it really mean?

He sensed a oneness, a collective solitude focusing on the cooperative. He imagined something lurking outside there in the darkness, hovering at the edge of awareness.

Dasein put a hand to the seat. His fingers groped across the briefcase with its notes and documents, all the things that said he was a scientist. He tried to cling to this idea.

I'm a scientist. This uneasiness is what Aunt Nora would've called "the vapors."

What the scientist had to do was very clear in Dasein's mind. He had to insinuate himself into the Santaroga world, find his

place in their oneness, live their life for a time, think as they thought. It was the one sure way to plumb the valley's mystery. There was a Santaroga state of mind. He had to put it on like a suit of clothes, fit it to his understanding.

This thought brought the sensation that something intruded on his inner awareness. He felt that an ancient being had risen there and examined him. It filled his whole subconscious, peering, urgent, restless—sensed only by reflection, indistinct, blurred . . . but real. It moved within him, something heavy and blundering.

The sensation passed.

When it was gone, there was an emptiness in Dasein such that it explained the whole concept of being empty. He felt himself to be a floating chip lost on an endless sea, fearful of every current and eddy that moved him.

He knew he was projecting. He was afraid to go back down into the valley, afraid to run away.

Jaspers.

There was another thing he had to do, Dasein knew. Again, he pictured the map on George Nis's wall, the black tributary lines, the ganglia pattern.

Cave.

He shivered, stared toward the distant bustling that was the Co-op. What lay hidden there behind the chain fence, the guards,

the dogs and the prowling bush buggy?

There could be a way to find out.

Dasein stepped from the truck, locked the cab. The only weapon he could find in the camper was a rusty hunting knife with a mildewed sheath. He slipped the sheath onto his belt, working clumsily one-handed, feeling more than a little foolish, but aware also of that inner sense of danger. There was a penlight, too. He pocketed it.

The movement set his shoulder throbbing. Dasein ignored the pain, telling himself it would be too easy to find a physical excuse for not doing what he knew he had to do.

A narrow game trail led down the hill from the upper end of the guard fence. Dasein picked his way down the trail, marking the path in the moonlight until it descended into brush-choked shadows.

Branches pulled at his clothing. He bulled his way through, guiding himself by the moon and the bustle of the Co-op, which was visible whenever he topped a ridge. Whatever the Santaroga mystery, Dasein knew, the answer lay there behind that chain fence.

Once, he stumbled and slid down a dry creekbed. Following the creekbed brought him out onto a tiny alluvial plain that opened onto a panoramic view of

SCAR-TISSUE



By HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

Although most of his fantasies first appeared—during the 30's—in such now lamented pulps as Weird Tales, Adventure, and Strange Tales, some of the late Henry S. Whitehead's very best stories only came to light long after his death in 1932. Notably the almost Kiplingesque short we offer you now, in which an "ordinary" seaman (a graduate of Harvard and Oxford) is more than convinced that God knows how many thousands of years ago he died horribly in legendary Atlantis. And he has the scar to prove it!

Illustrated by ROBERT FUQUA



"WHAT is your opinion on the Atlantis question?" I asked my friend Dr. Pelletier of the U.S. Navy, as he relaxed during the afternoon swizzle hour on my West gallery. He waved a depreciating hand.

"All the real evidence points to it, doesn't it, Canevin? The harbor here in St. Thomas, for instance. Crater of a volcano. What could bring a crater down to sea-level like that, unless the submergence of quadrillions of tons of earth and rock, or the submergence of a continent?" Then: "What made you ask me that, Canevin?"

"A case," I replied. "Picked him up yesterday morning just after he had jumped-ship from that Spanish tram, the *Bilbao*, that was coaling at the West

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India Docks yesterday morning. She pulled out this afternoon without him. Says his name is Joe Smith. A rough and tough bird, if I ever saw one. Up against it. They were crowding him pretty heavily, according to his story. Extra watches. Hazing. Down with the damned gringo! Looks as if he could handle himself, too — hard as nails. I've got him right here in the house."

"What are you keeping him shut up for?" inquired Pelletier lazily. "There isn't anybody on his trail now, is there?"

"No," I said. "But he was all shot to pieces from lack of sleep. Red rims around his eyes. He's upstairs, asleep, probably dead to the world. I looked in on him an hour ago."

"What bearing has the alleged Joe Smith on Atlantis?" Pelletier's tone was still lazily curious.

"Well," I said, "Smith looks to me as though he had one of those dashes of 'ancestral memory,' like the fellow Kipling tells about, the one who 'remembered' being a slave at the oars, and how a Roman galley was put together. Only, this isn't any measly two thousand years ago. This is—"

Pelletier straightened in his lounge-chair.

"Good God, Canevin! And he's here — in this house?"

Twenty minutes later Smith stepped out on the gallery. He looked vastly different from the

beachcomber I had picked up near the St. Thomas market-place the morning before. He was tall and spare, and my white drill clothes might have been made for him. He was cleanly shaven and his step was alert.

Pelletier did most of the talking. He established a quick footing with Smith with an obvious view to getting his story of the "buried memory" which the fellow had mentioned to me, and which pointed, he had hinted, at Atlantis.

At the end of ten minutes or so, Pelletier surprised me.

"What was your college, Smith?" he inquired.

"Harvard and Oxford," he answered. "Rhodes Scholar. Took my M.A. at Balliol. Yes, of course, Dr. Pelletier. Ask me anything you like. This 'buried memory' affair has come on me three different times, as a matter of fact. Always when I'm below par physically, a bit run down, vitality lower than normal. I mentioned it to Mr. Canevin yesterday — sensed that he would be interested. I've read his stuff, you see, for the past dozen years or so!"

I was getting interested myself now.

"Tell us about it," invited Pelletier, and Joe Smith proceeded to do so:

"It began when I was a small boy, after scarlet fever. I got up

too soon and went swimming, had a relapse, and the next three or four days, lying in bed, I 'realized' that I was *memoriter familiar* with a previous life in which I wore clothing of animal skins and used stone-headed clubs. I had the ability to run long distances and go up and down trees without much effort, and could easily club a bear to death. The thing passes off, dims out, although the recollection remained quite clear, as soon as I was well again.

"The second time was after the Spring track-meet with Yale when I was twenty-one. I had run in the 220, and then, half an hour later, I put everything I had into a quarter-mile, and won it. I lay around and rested according to my trainer's orders for a week — not even reading a book. Then I 'remembered' — not the cave-life this time — but Africa. Portuguese and Negroes; enormous buildings, some of them with walls sixteen feet thick. Granite quarries and the Portuguese sweating the Blacks in some ancient gold mines. There were two rivers. I fished in them a great deal, with a big iron hook. They were called, the rivers, I mean, the Lindi and the Sobi.

"Curious kind of place. There was one enormous ruin, a circular tower on top of a round hill which was formed by an outcropping in the granite. There

was a procession of bulls carved around the pediment. Yes, and the signs of the Zodiac."

"Southern Rhodesia!" I cried out. "The Portuguese controlled it in the Fifteenth Century, before Columbus' time. Why, man, that place is the traditional site of Solomon's gold mines!"

"Right!" Smith remarked, turning an intelligent eye in my direction. "It was pronounced, in those days — 'Zim-baub-weh' — accent on the first syllable. I've often wondered if it wasn't the Romans who carved those bulls, they had the place first, called it *Anaeropolis*. Plenty of legionaries were Mithraists, and the bull was Mithras' symbol, you know."

"And the last one, Smith," Pelletier cut in. "You mentioned Atlantis, Canevin tells me."

"Well," began Smith once more, "the fact that it was Atlantis is, really secondary. There is one item in *that* 'memory' which is of very much greater interest, I should imagine.

"I don't want to be theatrical, gentlemen! But — well, I think the best way to begin telling you about it is to show you this!"

He rose and loosening his belt, pulled up his shirt and singlet, exposing a bronzed torso. Beginning a half-inch above his right hip-bone and extending straight across as though laid out with a ruler across the abdomen, ran a

livid, inch-wide scar.

Joe Smith tucked in his shirt, tightened his belt, and sat down again. "That's where it begins," he said, and, as my house-man. Stephen Penn, appeared at this moment with the dinner-cocktails, he added: "I'll tell you about it after dinner."

It was Pelletier who started things off as soon as we were settled on the gallery again, with coffee and Chartreuse before us.

"I want to know, please, how you happen to be alive."

Smith smiled wryly.

"I never told this before," he said, "and if I was somewhat preoccupied during dinner it was because I've been figuring out how to put it all together for you.

"It's hard to put into words but it seemed as if I were walking through a short enclosed passageway, rather wide, stone-flagged, and low-ceilinged. In front of me, beside me, and behind me, walked eighteen or twenty others, all of us armed. Up in front of us, in bronze armor, and closing our rear, marched eight legionaries of the Ludektan army assigned to us as guards.

"We came out into the drenching sunlight of a great sanded arena. We followed our advance guard in a sharp turn to the right and wheeled to the right-face before a great awninged box full of the Ludektan nobles and digni-

taries, where we saluted sharply.

"Do you get that picture? Here we were, prisoners of war—after a couple of months of the hardest training I have ever known, in the Ludektan gladiatorial school, about to shed our blood to make an Atlantean holiday!

"The really tough part of it was the uncertainty. I mean a fellow might be paired to fight one of his friends. But I was fortunate that day. I was paired with a Gamfron—a nearly black Atlantean mountain lion, an animal about the size and heft of an Indian black panther—Bagheera, in Kipling's Mowgli yarn! I had been armed with a short, sharp, double-edged sword and a small bronze buckler. Otherwise I had been given choice of my own accoutrement and I had selected greaves, a light breastplate and a close-fitting helmet with a face-guard attachment with eye holes, covering practically my whole face and the back and sides of my neck.

"When it came my turn to step out on the sand and wait for the lion to be released, I asked the official in charge for permission to discard the buckler and use an additional weapon, a long dagger, in my left hand. I received the permission, and at the signal-blast which was made with a ram's horn, walked slowly towards the cage-entrance. I had noted that the sun was shining directly, full

against that particular iron door.

"My strategy worked precisely as I had hoped.

The great beast came out blinking. Before its cat eyes became adjusted to the sun's glare I launched myself upon it, and when I sprang away, the hilt of that dagger was sticking in the Gamfron's back. The beast rolled over in the sand, hoping, I suppose, to dislodge the dagger. The hilt was twisted, I noticed, when the Gamfron again crouched for its leap at me.

"In the split seconds before it launched itself at me I could hear the wild tumult from the stands. The crowd swayed hysterically—screaming for blood. Mine.

"I side-stepped as the beast charged, but instead of trying another slash, I whirled, and as the beast plowed up the sand beside me, I threw myself upon it and, thrust my sword into the soft flesh of its throat, severing the jugular. Then, my feet and legs wedged hard under the animal's flanks. I reached under its jaws, swinging backward from the fulcrum of my knees and hauled the Gamfron's head backwards towards me.

"The snap could be heard throughout the arena. The great beast relaxed under me. I recovered my sword, stood up, placed my right foot upon the carcass and held up my sword toward the notables in the rigid

salute signifying victory.

"The next thing I was directly conscious of was a hand falling on my left shoulder. I relaxed, let down my sword, and heard the voice of the official in charge of the gladiators telling me that I was reprieved. I stumbled along beside him around the edge of the arena under a continuous shower of felt hats and gold and silver coin until I felt the grateful shade of a stone passage-way on my almost melting back, and a minute later, with my armor off, I was being doused from head to foot with buckets of cold water.

"It was perhaps twenty minutes later when the official in charge of the gladiators came into the small stone-flagged room where I was tying the thongs of my sandals.

"The people demand your presence in the arena,' he announced from just inside the doorway. I rose and bowed in his direction. A public gladiator in Ludekta had the status of a slave. Then the official announced: 'You have been chosen to fight Godbor as the day's concluding event—come!'"

"Half way along the passage-way the official stopped and turned to me, whispering with earnestness and vehemency directly into my ear. And when he had finished I was a new man! Gone now were all the feelings of rebellious hatred which his

announcement at the rubbing-room door had raised up in me. He turned and led the way out into the arena. And I followed him now gladly, eagerly, my head up and my heart beating high.

"A thunderous roar greeted us, and the massed thousands rose in their seats like one man. A black slave stepping towards us from the barrier handed a bulging leather sack to the official. He took it and spoke to me over his shoulder. 'These are your coins that were thrown into the ring. I will keep them safely for you!'

"Then we proceeded to a point directly before the great canopied enclosure of the nobles. Here, after saluting with my arms and hands straight up above my head and not giving their spokesman an opportunity to address me, I put into immediate effect what my unsuspecting friend, had whispered in my ear.

"'I will fight Godbor to the death,' I shouted.

"A deafening howl went up from the multitude. I waited quietly until the tumult died, and then as soon as I could be heard once more I addressed the nobles.

"'My Lords, I have proclaimed my willingness to please you despite the Ludektan Law which requires no man to fight twice in the arena on the same day. I beseech your nobility therefore, in return for this my good will to meet your desire, that you ac-

cord me my liberty, if I survive.'

"There was a deathly silence about the arena, while the nobles consulted together.

I stood there, rigid, waiting for this decision which meant far more than life or death to me. I could see the right arms of the members of that vast concourse being raised in the Ludektan voting gesture of approval.

"Then, as Bothon, who had been generalissimo of all the Ludektan armies, rose in his place to give me my answer, that sharp humming sound stilled and died and twenty thousand men and women leaned forward on their benches to hear the decision. Bothon was both terse and explicit.

"'The petition is granted,' he announced.

"Remembering clearly all that the arena official had told me, I waited once more until I could be heard, and when that instant arrived I saluted the nobles and said:

"'I would gladly slay the traitorous dog Godbor without reward, o illustrious, for not even yourselves, who deprived him of his Ludektan citizenship and condemned him to the arena, are better aware of his infamy than we of Lemuria who refused to profit by his treachery. I petition you that the rules which are to govern our combat be stated here, in his presence and mine, that there be no treachery but a fair fight.'

"At this, which had been listened to in a dead silence that was almost painful, the mob on the benches broke out again.

Watching the nobles' enclosure I saw Bothon turning his eyes to those about him. When he had gathered their decisions he turned to me and made the sign of approval.

"Back in the preparation rooms with the chief official himself over-looking every detail, I got myself ready for my last fight in the arena. I was very well aware that I was now confronted with the most serious ordeal of my life. Not only had I spent most of my strength in that conflict with the wild beast, but also I was about to encounter in the traitor Godbor, one of the most skillful and tricky hand-to-hand fighters that the Ludektan army had ever produced. He would be fresh, too.

"At high noon, Godbor who had been similarly prepared in another room, walked beside me in the usual form of procession, proceeding through the passageway and into the blinding glare, shortly to stand side by side listening to Bothon repeat the rules of the combat.

"And then on a great square of freshly pressed and dampened sand we two stood facing each other tensed for a conflict from which one or the other would never leave.

"At the single blast from the

herald's horn I leaped at my enemy. He had started forward at the same instant himself. I caught his descending blade squarely on the knob of my bronze buckler, relaxing my left arm to lessen the shock of the blow, at the same time delivering a thrust above Godbor's buckler. The fresh-ground, razor-like point of my sword struck his upper shoulder, severing the tendon and rendering his left arm useless. I made a rapid recovery, but the equally swift forward leap of Godbor brought him breast to breast with me. He managed to shift his sword into a dagger-like position, and I was barely able to divert the stabbing stroke which he aimed for my left side.

"We backed away from each other then for, according to the stated rules of the combat, our initial attack-and-defense was completed. Then I lowered my sword as I saw Godbor drooping forward, his knees sagging under him, his eyes closing. As I stood there, waiting for him to recover himself, he suddenly dropped off the buckler from his left arm, and, launching himself forward, drove the bronze helmet he wore against my chest.

"I went crashing down under the terrific blow and I could hear very clearly, rising above everything, the howl of rage which rose from the spectators on every side.

"Then, Godbor was upon me, his face a distorted mask of hatred. His sword slashed into my right hip bone and across the lower and unprotected edge of my ribs.

"A dull-red cloud descended upon me, and a vicious stab of pain that swelled with each second. My fast-dimming eyes caught the edge of the strange spectacle of the people of the benches leaping down on the sand in their dozens and scores and hundreds, pouring over the barriers into the arena like cascades.

"And, with the dimming chorus of their massed roars of hate in my ears, I let go of life."

Joe Smith ceased speaking, rose, and walked over to the center table. I noticed that his hands trembled as he poured himself out the second drink he had taken since he had been in my house. Deep lines, too, that had not shown before dinner, were in his clean-shaven face. It was evident that the telling of his strange tale had done something to him. He settled in his chair again before either Pelletier or I offered any comment.

"I imagine Godbor didn't survive you very long," I said. "That mob probably took him apart."

Smith nodded. "He was very unpopular—execrated, in fact." Pelletier's comments were in

an entirely different vein.

"I beg of you, don't misunderstand me, Smith, but most people would say it's a wonderful yarn, as a yarn, but that's all. Atlantis, Zimbabwe, that cave-boy stuff! That scar of yours for a point of departure; well-known facts, open to any reader, about the ancestral memory theory; and all of 'em worked up into a yarn that is, I grant you, a cornercracker! Exactly right, you see, for a couple of fellows like Canevin and me, known to be interested in out-of-the-ordinary matters. That, I say, is what the majority of people would say. I'm not insulting you by putting it that way myself. I merely call attention to the fact that there isn't a thing in it that couldn't have been put together by a clever story-teller."

Smith merely nodded. "Precisely as you put it," he said. "Precisely, except for this."

And he rose from his chair, once again loosened his belt, and exposed that frightful scar.

Pelletier, the surgeon uppermost at once, got up, came over to Smith, and peered closely at it.

"Hm," he remarked, "the real mystery isn't in that yarn, Smith. It's in how you ever survived this! The breadth of this scar shows that the wound must have been several inches deep. It cut straight through the intestines

and just about bisected the spleen. Such a cut would kill a man in a few minutes."

"It did, as I told you," said Smith, a little crisply.

"My dear man!" protestingly, from Pelletier.

But Joe Smith remained entirely unruffled.

"You know, of course, what scar-tissue feels like to the touch," he said. "Run your hand over this, Doctor. Then tell us if you ever felt any other scar-tissue like it. It *looks* like any other scar, of course."

Pelletier did as requested, his attitude plainly skeptical. But he straightened up from this examination with a very different look on his face.

"Good God!" he breathed. "There's nothing to feel! This thing only *looks* like scar-tissue! What—?"

Smith carefully tucked in his shirt.

"It's precisely the way I told it to you. I was born without any appearance of a scar, although it falls within the classification of so-called 'birthmarks.' It did not begin to appear until I was twenty-seven. That was my age when I died there in the arena, from that wound in the same place, just as I told you."

Pelletier looked at Joe Smith in blank silence. Then he asked, "Did you have it on you during those two other 'memory-exper-

iences' you spoke of, as a cave-boy, or there in Africa in the Fifteenth Century?"

"No," Smith replied. "I suppose the reason is that I was not yet twenty-seven years of age in either of those two experiences."

"Well, I'll take your word for it all, Smith," said Pelletier. "It's been mighty interesting."

The two of them bowed to each other, Pelletier smiling whimsically, Joe Smith's tired, lined face inscrutable.

Just after this Pelletier took his departure.

Half an hour later—it must have been about eleven—Smith rapped on the door of my bedroom. He was in pajamas and bathrobe, and wearing a pair of my spare slippers.

"Would you like to hear the rest of it?" he asked, coming in and taking a chair. He placed something he had been carrying beside him on the wide chair's cushion.

"There isn't much more of it," he remarked, "but I'd rather like you to hear it all together."

"Fire away." I invited, settling myself.

"That 'birth-mark' of mine," he began, "isn't the only thing I could have shown you this evening. I had *this* around my waist, too!"

He reached down beside him and unrolled the thing he had

brought into my room. It was a pigskin money-belt.

"There's between seven and eight hundred pounds in this," he remarked, laying it on the table beside him, "in Bank of England notes. I thought you might put it in your safe until tomorrow, and then I'll put it in the bank. And now, here's the rest of my story.

"I'd been on board the *Bilbao* nearly two months when we struck this port of St. Thomas to coal. It was, to be precise, the fourteenth of August when I went on board her, in Santander. Three days before that, while I was sitting eating my dinner, a big fellow came in and took a table across the room from me. I didn't particularly take note of him except that he was big. He had an ugly face that seemed vaguely familiar.

"Then quite suddenly, it broke upon me. I knew who he was! It was 'Godbor,' Canevin—Godbor to the life! The man who had killed me in the arena!

"I sat there, and just sweated. I remembered putting my face between my hands, my elbows on the table, and feeling just plain sick.

"And then he moved over to my table and sat down.

"He was civil enough. His name was Fernando Lopez. He was the first mate of the *Bilbao*, just arrived in Santander harbor, expect-

ing to clear for Buenos Aires three or four days from then.

"Lopez proposed that we eat together. Somehow I couldn't refuse. There was almost a weird fascination about the man. While we ate I told him I was a painter and required as much time to myself, including mealtime, as I could get. I spoke, of course, without trying to insult him, but nevertheless giving the impression I wanted to be alone. But it was no use.

"We drank together, and within a few hours I had passed out. When I awoke it was morning—the morning of the day the *Bilbao* was to clear from Santander, about seven o'clock. And then I found my money-belt gone! Fernando Lopez, too, was gone! He had probably gone on board, I figured, ready for the ship's departure, confident that he had made a clean getaway.

He saw me, as soon as I came on board. I charged him flatly with the theft. He made no bones about it, admitted he had taken the money-belt from me after I passed out, and had it down in his cabin. I demanded its return and he shrugged, walking toward his cabin.

"As I walked in after him, something struck me over the head. I came to in a berth, with my hands ironed, and a head that seemed too big for my body.

"For three days I sweated

through a period that was like a nightmare.

"The captain, an old man named Chico Perez, who was Lopez' uncle, forced me to sign on. I was watched every minute and given the work of two men to do.

"They ironed me again the day we put into Buenos Aires. Lopez was taking no chances on my jumping ship and reporting him. Then, two days after we cleared from there, the old captain disappeared. I have no doubts in my own mind about what happened to him. Lopez probably threw him overboard.

"That fact, I imagine, saved me. You see, the entire crew had sailed with the old man, who was a part owner of the ship. Lopez, while he now commanded the *Bilbao*, did not dare to risk a mutiny if another member of the ship's company 'disappeared' in the same manner.

"We made four or five other South American ports, Cartagena last of all, and then we were to put in to St. Thomas for coal. This was the first American port of the voyage. I picked up a little hope.

"We were actually in sight of St. Thomas when I got my chance. It was about five o'clock in the evening, four days ago. I was on deck, and we had just made our landfall. Lopez was coming towards me across the deck. I wait-

ed until he was within a few feet of me, and then I lunged forward. My fist hit Lopez' jaw, knocking him flat on the deck.

"He was up almost instantly, snarling, and a knife appeared in his hand. I ducked his first rush and tripped him as he swept by me. His knife clattered on the deck as he hit it.

"I lunged forward and my fingers closed over the blade. I don't know what happened next, but suddenly the knife was imbedded in Lopez' back and I was on my feet, trembling with a cold sweat.

"One by one the crew members walked up. They all seemed to be smiling at me.

"I watched the knife being withdrawn from Lopez' body by one of them, and then, five men quietly heaved the body overboard.

"Nothing was said to me. There was no report, no investigation after we anchored in St. Thomas Harbor.

"I had gone straight down to Lopez' cabin after the money-belt, put it on, and came back on deck.

"No one stopped me when I went ashore. I imagine that that ship's family was only too glad to get rid of the fellow who had relieved them of Fernando Lopez. The rest of it you know, Canevin. I might add that I haven't the smallest possible regret over kill-

ing Lopez. If those 'ancestral memories' of mine are authentic, I have killed before, but never in *this life*, certainly."

Joe Smith sat silent, and I sat across from him and looked at him. The only thing I could think of to ask, seemed an incongruity after what I had listened to that day! However I had to ask it.

"What is your real name, Smith?" I inquired.

He stared at me.

"Joe Smith," he said.

I nodded then. "I'll put your money in the safe and we'll go to the bank with it in the morning."

I saw him out, and picked up the money-belt from the table and carried it over to my house-safe standing in the corner of my bedroom.

I opened the safe and was about to lay the belt inside when I felt something rough against my hand. I turned it about and look-

ed. A name was embossed upon the fine pigskin leather of the other side. I held it up to the light to read it. I read:

"JOSEPHUS TROY SMITH"

I put the belt inside and closed and locked the safe.

Then I came back and sat down in the chair where I had listened to my guest's recital of his recent adventures aboard the Spanish tramp steamer *Bilbao*.

Josephus Troy Smith. It wasn't so vastly different from "Joe Smith," and yet what a different viewpoint that full name had given me! Josephus Troy Smith, America's foremost landscapist! Josephus Troy Smith! I realized now whom I was having the honor of entertaining in my house on Denmark Hill, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands of the U.S.A. He was the eccentric artist, Josephus Troy Smith—or was he . . .

The End

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SANTAROGA BARRIER, Continued from page 133

the Co-op and the valley beyond bathed in moonlight. Twice, he startled deer which went bounding and leaping off into the night. There were frequent scampering sounds in the brush as small creatures fled his blundering approach.

Holding to a narrow game trail, he came at last to a rock ledge about a thousand yards from the Co-op's fence and five hundred feet above it. Dasein sat down on a rock to catch his breath and, in the sudden silence, heard a powerful engine laboring somewhere to his right. A light swept the sky. He crept back into a low copse of buck brush, crouched there.

The sound of the engine grew louder, louder. A set of giant wheels climbed out against the stars to occupy a hill above him. From somewhere above the wheels, a light flashed on, swept across the brush, probing, pausing, darting back and forth.

Dasein recognized the bush buggy, a monster vehicle some two hundred feet away. He felt exposed, naked with only a shield of thin brush between him and that nightmare creation. The light washed over the leaves above him.

Here it comes, he thought. It'll come right down the hill onto me.

The sound of the engine had grown muted while the bush buggy paused to search its surround-

ings. It was so near that Dasein heard a dog whining on it, remembered the dogs that had accompanied Marden.

The dogs will smell me, he thought.

He tried to draw himself into as tight a ball as possible.

The engine sounds grew suddenly louder.

Dasein moved a branch, ventured a look through the brush, preparing himself to leap and run. But the big machine turned up the ridge upon which it had emerged. It passed across the hills above Dasein, the noise and light receding.

When it was gone, he took a moment to calm himself, crept out to the lip of the rock ledge. Dasein saw then why the buggy had not come down upon him. This was a dead end, no trail down from here. He would have to climb up where the machine had emerged upon the hill, backtrack on it to find a way down.

He started to turn away, paused at sight of a black gash in the floor of the ledge off to his right. Dasein crossed to the break in the rock, looked down into darkness. The break in the rock wasn't more than three feet across, opening out to the face of the ledge, narrowing to a point about twenty feet to his right. Dasein knelt, risked a brief flash of his penlight. The light revealed a smooth-walled chimney leading down to another ledge. What was more im-

portant, he could see a game trail down there in the moonlight.

Dasein slid his feet over the edge of the chimney, sat down there with his legs hanging into the darkness, considered the problem. The injured shoulder made him hesitate. Without that, he'd have gone right over, worked his way down, back against one side, feet against the other. Dangerous, yes—but a thing he had done many times in mountains rougher than these. The other ledge was no more than fifty feet down there.

He looked around him, wondering if he dared risk it. In this instant, his mind offered up the datum that he had forgotten to mail off the carbons of his notes to Selador. It was like a cold dash of water in the face. He felt that his own body had betrayed him, that he had conspired against himself.

How could I have forgotten? he wondered. There was anger in the thought, and fear. Perspiration bathed his palms. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wristwatch: almost midnight. There came over him then the almost overpowering desire to retrace his way back to the road and the camper.

He was suddenly more afraid of what his own body might do to him than he was of any danger which could come out of the night or of the climb down this simple rock chimney. Dasein sat

there trembling, recalling his feeling that he was *possessed*.

This was madness!

He shook his head angrily.

There was no turning back; he had to go down there, find a way into that Co-op, expose its secrets. While the strength of anger was upon him, Dasein probed across the chimney with his feet, found the other side, slid off his perch and began working his way down. At each movement of his back, his shoulder stabbed him with pain. He gritted his teeth, felt his way down through the darkness. Rock scraped across his back. Once, his right foot slipped and he strained with the left for purchase.

The floor of the chimney when he found it was almost an anticlimax, a slope of loose rock which slid from beneath his feet and cascaded him out onto the game trail he had seen from above.

Dasein lay there a moment regaining his breath, allowing the fire in his shoulder to subside to a dull throb.

Presently, he struggled to his feet, marked where the moonlighted trail led down to his right. He picked his way down through a screen of brush on to a sloping meadow dotted with dark shapes of oaks. Moonlight gleamed on the fence beyond the meadow. There it was, the boundary of the Co-op. He wondered if he could climb that fence one-handed. It would be galling to come

this far only to be stopped by a fence.

As he stood there examining the meadow and the fence, a deep humming sound impressed itself on him. It came from off to his right. He searched for the source of the sound, eyes hunting through shadows. Was that a gleam of metal down there, something round emerging from the meadow? He crouched low in the dry grass. There was a heavy odor of mushrooms all around. He recognized it abruptly—the smell of *Jaspers*. It came over Dasein that he was staring at a ventilator.

Ventilator!

He lifted himself to his feet, trotted across the meadow toward the sound. There was no mistaking that sound nor the wash of *Jaspers*-saturated air that enveloped him. There was a big fan at work down there under the earth.

Dasein stopped beside the ventilator outlet. It was about four feet across, stood approximately the same distance above the meadow topped by a cone-shaped rain hood. He was about to examine the fastenings of the hood when he heard a snuffling sound and crackling of brush from the direction of the fence. He ducked behind the ventilator as two uniformed guards emerged from the brush beyond the fence, dogs sniffing hungrily ahead of them, straining at their leashes.

If they get my scent, Dasein thought.

He crouched behind the ventilator breathing softly through his mouth. There was a tickling sensation on the back of his tongue. He wanted to cough, clear his throat, fought down the impulse. Dogs and guards had stopped directly below him.

A glaring light washed across the ventilator, swept the ground on both sides. One of the dogs whined eagerly. There was a rattling sound, a sharp command from one of the guards.

Dasein held his breath.

Again, something rattled. The sounds of guards and dogs moved along the fence. Dasein ventured a quick glance around the ventilator. They were flashing a light along the base of the fence, looking for tracks. One of the guards laughed. Dasein felt the touch of a light breeze on his cheeks, realized he was downwind from the dogs, allowed himself to relax slightly. The rattling sound came once more. Dasein saw it was one of the guards dragging a stick along the fence.

The casual mood of the guards caused him to relax even more. He took a deep breath. They were going over a low hill now, down the other side. The night swallowed them.

Dasein waited until he no longer could hear them before straightening. His left knee was trembling, and it took a moment

for this tremor to subside.

Guards, dogs, that big bush buggy—all spoke of something important here. Dasein nodded to himself, began examining the ventilator. There was a heavy screen beneath the rain cap. He ventured a flash of penlight, saw hood and screen were a welded unit held to the ventilator by heavy sheet metal screws.

Dasein brought out his hunting knife, tried one of the screws. Metal screeched against metal as he turned it. He stopped, listened. His ears detected only the sounds of the night. There was an owl somewhere in the brush above him. Its mournful call floated across the night. Dasein returned to the screw. It came out in his hand and he pocketed it, moved on to the next one. There were four in all.

When the last screw was out, he tried the screen. It and the hood lifted with a rasping metallic protest. He flashed his penlight inside, saw smooth metal walls going straight down about fifteen feet before curving back toward the hills.

Dasein returned the screen and hood to their normal position, went searching under the oaks until he found a fallen branch about six feet long. He used this to prop the hood and screen, peered once more down the ventilator with the penlight.

It was going to take two hands getting in there, he realized. No

other way. Gritting his teeth, he removed the sling, stuffed it into a pocket. Even without the sling, he knew the arm wasn't going to be much use . . . except perhaps in an emergency. He felt the rim of the ventilator—sharp, rough metal. The sling, he thought. He brought it out, rolled it into a pad for his hands. Using this pad, he hauled himself across the lip of the ventilator. The pad slipped and he felt metal bite his stomach. He grabbed the edge, swung himself inward. Metal ripped buttons off his shirt. He heard them clatter somewhere below. His good hand found a purchase over a bit of the sling; he dropped down, pain screaming in his injured shoulder, swung his feet to the opposite side, turned and braced himself. Feet and back held. He slipped the hunting knife out of its sheath, reached up, knocked the limb prop aside.

Screen and hood came down with a clang he felt must have been heard for a mile. He waited, listening.

Silence.

Slowly, he began inching his way down.

Presently, his feet encountered the curve. He straightened, used the penlight. The ventilator slanted back under the hill at a gentle slope of about twenty degrees. There was something soft under his left foot. The light revealed the sling. He picked it up. The front of his shirt was sticking

to his skin. He turned the light on it, saw red wetness, a section of skin scraped off by the lip of the ventilator. The pain was as a minor scratch compared to his shoulder.

I'm a mess, he thought. What the hell am I doing here?

The answer was there in his mind, clear and disturbing. He was here because he had been maneuvered into a one-way passage as direct and confining as this ventilator tube. Selador and friends formed one side of the passage; Jenny and fellow Santarogans formed the other side.

And here he was.

Dasein lifted the sling. It was torn but still servicable. He gripped one end in his teeth, managed to restore it to a semblance of its former position.

There was only one way to go now. He dropped to his knees, crawled backward down the ventilator, using his light occasionally to probe the darkness.

The Jaspers odor filled the confined space. It was a tangy essence of mushrooms here. He received the distinct impression it cleared his head.

The tube went on and on and on . . . He took it one step at a time. It curved slowly toward what he felt was south, and the slope steepened. Once, he slipped, slid downward for twenty feet, cutting his left hand on a rivet. He wasn't positive, but he thought the sound of the fan

motor grew intrusively louder.

Again, the tube turned—and again. Dasein lost all sense of direction in the confining darkness. Why had they constructed this ventilator with so many turns? he wondered. Had they followed a natural fault in the rock? It seemed likely.

His left foot encountered an edge of emptiness.

Dasein stopped, used the penlight. Its feeble glow illuminated a flat metal wall about six feet away and a square of shadows beneath it. He turned the light downward, exposed a box-like opening about five feet deep with a heavy screen for one side. The sound of the fan motor came from somewhere behind the screen and it definitely was louder here.

Bracing himself with a hand in the screen, Dasein lowered himself into the box. He stood there a moment examining his surroundings. The wall opposite the screen appeared different from the others. There were six round-head bolts in it held by flanged metal keepers as though they'd been designed to stay in that position while nuts were tightened from the outside.

Dasein pried up one of the flanges with his knife, turned the bolt. It moved easily, too easily. He pulled back on it, turned it once more. That took more effort and he was rewarded by having the bolt work backward into his

hand. The nut dropped outside with a sound of falling on wood.

He waited, listening for a response to that sound.

Nothing.

Dasein put his eye to the bolt hole, peered out into an eerie red gloom. As his eye grew accustomed to it, he made out a section of heavy screen across from him, packages piled behind the screen.

He drew back. Well, Nis had said this was a storage cave.

Dasein applied himself to the other bolts. He left the bolt in the upper right corner, bent the metal out and swung it aside. There was a wooden catwalk immediately below him with three wing nuts on it. He slipped out to the catwalk, scooped up the wing nuts. The other nuts obviously had dropped through the space between the boards of the walk. He looked around, studying what he saw with care, absorbing the implications of this place.

It was a troglodyte cave illuminated by dim red light. The light came from globes beneath the catwalk and above it, casting enormous shadows on a rock wall behind the ventilator panel and over stacked tiers of cage-walled compartments. The cages were stuffed with packages and reminded Dasein of nothing more than a public freezer locker.

The richly moist odor of Jaspers was all around him.

A sign to his right down the

catwalk labeled this area as "Bay 21—D-1 to J-5."

Dasein returned his attention to the ventilator, restored three of the bolts, forcing the cover plate back into position. A crease remained in the metal where he had bent it, but he thought it would pass casual inspection.

He looked up and down the catwalk.

Where would he find one of these compartments he could open to examine the contents? He crossed to the one opposite the ventilator plate, looked for a door. Could he find a compartment left unlocked by a careless Santarogan . . . provided he could find the door? There apparently was no door on the first compartment he inspected. The lack of a door filled Dasein with unease. There had to be a door!

He stepped back, studied the line of compartments, gasped as he saw the answer. The fronts of the compartments slid aside in wooden channels . . . and there were no locks. Simple peg latches held them.

Dasein opened the front of a compartment, pulled out a small cardboard box. Its label read: "Auntie Beren's spiced crab apples. Ex. April '55." He replaced the box, extracted a salami-shaped package. Its label read: "Limburger exposed early 1929." Dasein replaced the limburger, closed the compartment.

Exposed?

Methodically, Dasein worked his way down the line in Bay 21, examining one or two packages in each compartment. Most of the time it was written "Ex" with a date. The older packages spelled it out.

Exposed.

Dasein sensed his mind racing.

Exposed. Exposed to what? How?

The sound of footsteps on the lower catwalk behind him brought Dasein around, muscles tense. He heard a compartment door slide open. Papers rustled.

Softly, Dasein worked his way along the catwalk away from the sound. He passed steps, one set leading up, one down, hesitated. He couldn't be certain whether he was going deeper into the cave complex or out of it. There was another catwalk above him, a rock ceiling dimly visible above that. There appeared to be at least three tiers of catwalks below him.

He chose the steps going up, lifted his head slowly above the floor level of the next walk, glanced both ways.

Empty.

This level was like the one below except for the rock ceiling. The rock appeared to be a form of granite, but with oily brown veins.

Moving as silently as he could, Dasein climbed out onto the walk, moved back in the direction of the ventilator listening for the person he had heard on the low-

er level. Someone was whistling down there, an idiot tune repeated endlessly. Dasein pressed his back against a cage, peered down through the openings in the walk. There came a scraping of wood against wood. The whistling went away to his left, receded into silence.

That probably was the way out, then.

He had heard the person down there but hadn't been able to see him—a fact which could work both ways.

Placing his feet carefully, Dasein moved along the walk. He came to a cross way, peered around it. Empty both ways. The gloom appeared a little thicker to the left.

It occurred to Dasein that up to this point he hadn't felt the need to worry about how he was going to get out of the cave complex. He had been too intent on solving the mystery. But the mystery remained . . . and here he was.

I can't just go marching out, he thought. Or can't I? What could they do to me?

His throbbing shoulder, memory of the gas jet, the knowledge that two previous investigators had died in this valley—these were sufficient answer to the question, he thought.

Wood slammed against wood off to the front and below. Footsteps pounded along a catwalk—at least two pair of feet, possibly

more. The running stopped almost directly beneath him. There came a low-voiced conversation, mostly unintelligible and sounding like instructions. Dasein recognized only three words—"... back ..." "... away ..." and a third word which set him in motion running softly down the dim side passage to his left.

"... ventilator ..."

A man beneath him had said "ventilator" sharply and distinctly.

The pounding of feet resumed down there spreading out through the catwalks.

Dasein searched frantically ahead for a place to hide. There was a sound of machinery humming somewhere down there. The catwalk turned left at about a fifteen degree angle, and he saw the cave walls were converging here—fewer tiers below and smaller compartments on each side. The walk angled more sharply to the right, and there was only his walk and the one below, single compartments on each side.

He had put himself into a dead end passage, Dasein realized. Still, there was the sound of machinery ahead.

His catwalk ended in a set of wooden stairs going down. There was no choice; he could hear someone running behind him.

Dasein went down.

The stairs turned left into a rock passage—no compartments,

just the cave. There was a louvered door on the right, loud sound of an electric motor in there. His pursuer was at the head of the steps above.

Dasein opened the door, slipped through, closed the door. He found himself in a rectangular chamber about fifty feet long, twenty feet wide and some fifteen feet to the ceiling. A row of large electric motors lined the left wall, all of them extending into round metal throats with fan-blades blurring the air there. The far wall was one giant metal screen, and he could feel air rushing out of it toward the fans.

The right wall was piled high with cardboard cartons, sacks and wood boxes. There was a space between the pile and the ceiling, and it appeared darker up there. Dasein scrambled up the pile, crawled along it, almost fell into a space hollowed out of boxes and sacks near the far end. He slid into the hole, found himself on what felt like blankets. His hand encountered something metallic which groping fingers identified as a flashlight.

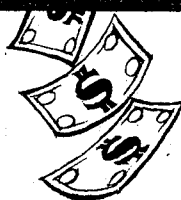
The louvered door slammed open. Feet pounded into the room. Someone scrambled up the far end of the pile. A woman's voice said: "Nothing up here."

There came the sound of someone dropping lightly to the floor.

There'd been something familiar about the woman's voice. Dasein was willing to swear he'd

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heard it before somewhere else.

A man said: "Why'd you run this way? Did you hear something?"

"I thought so, but I wasn't sure," the woman said.

"You sure there's nothing on top of the stores?"

"Look for yourself."

"Doggone, I wish we could use real lights in here."

"Now, don't you go doing something foolish."

"Don't worry about me. Doggone that Jenny anyway, getting herself mixed up with an outsider!"

"Don't pick on Jenny. She knows what she's doing."

"I guess so, but it sure makes a lot of stupid extra work, and you know what's liable to happen if we don't find him pretty soon."

"So let's hurry it up."

They went out, closed the door.

Dasein lay quietly absorbing the import of what they'd said. Jenny knew what she was doing did she? What would happen if they didn't find him?

It felt good to stretch out on the blankets. His shoulder was a steady aching throb. He brought up the flashlight he'd found here, pressed its switch. The thing produced a dull red glow. The light revealed a tight little nest—blankets, a pillow, a canteen half full of water. He drank some of it thirstily, found it heavy with Jaspers.

He supposed nothing in the

cave could escape that flavor.

A fit of shivering took over his muscles. The canteen's cap rattled as he replaced it. When the trembling passed, he sat staring at the canteen in the dim red light.

Nothing in the cave could escape the Jaspers flavor!

That was it!

Exposed!

Something that could exist in this cave—a mould or a fungus, something related to mushrooms and dark places, something that wouldn't travel . . . a *Jaspers* something invaded anything exposed to this environment.

But why was it so important to keep this fact secret? Why the dogs and the guards?

He heard the louvered door open, close, turned off the red flashlight. Someone ran lightly across the rock floor to a point just below him.

"Gilbert Dasein!" a voice hissed at him.

Dasein stiffened.

"It's Willa Burdeaux," the voice hissed. "It's Willa, Jenny's friend. I know you're in there, in the place Cal made for us. Now, you listen. Arnulf will be right back from the upper end, and I have to be out of here before that. You don't have much time. There's too much Jaspers in here for someone who's not used to it. You're breathing it, and it's going in your pores and everything."

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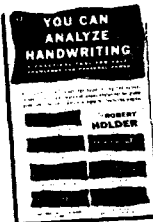


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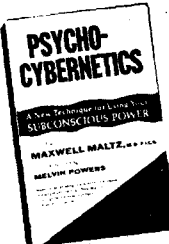
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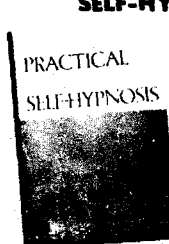
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What the hell? Dasein thought.

He crawled up out of the next, leaned out and looked down at Willa Burdeaux's dark, harshly-beautiful face.

"Why can't I take too much of it?" he asked.

"Hasn't that Jenny explained anything to you?" she whispered. "Well, no time now. You have to get out of here. Do you have a watch?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"There's no time to explain, just listen. Give me fifteen minutes to get Arnulf out of the way. He's such a prig. In fifteen minutes you come out of this room. Turn left the way you came in, but go down instead of up. Take the second crossway to your left and after that keep to your left. It's easy to remember. Left turns only. You want the ramp out of Bay 2-G. I've left the ramp's door unlocked. Lock it after you. It'll be about twenty steps straight in front of that door to an emergency gate. The gate's unlocked. Go out and lock it after you. The Inn's right across the road. You ought to be able to make that on your own."

"Apparently, you've been rather busy."

"I was in the office when they sounded the alarm. Now, get down out of sight and do just what I told you."

Dasein ducked back into the next.

Presently, he heard the door

open and close. He looked at his wristwatch: five minutes to three a.m. Where had the time gone?

Could he believe Willa Burdeaux? he wondered.

There'd been something about that black pixie face, an intensity . . . Dasein thought of compartments loaded with valuable food, all unlocked. Why should this evidence of a basic honesty alarm him? Perhaps it wasn't honesty. Fear could control behavior, too.

Could he believe Willa? Did he have a choice?

So this was a trysting place Cal Nis had made for the two of them. Why not? People in love usually wanted to be alone together.

Jenny knew what she was doing.

What did she know?

His mind felt clear and oiled, working at a furious pace. What was the danger in exposure to Jaspers? He thought of that dull-eyed line he'd glimpsed up there in the Co-op.

Was that what happened?

Dasein fought down a siege of trembling.

Ten minutes after three, the moment of decision, came more quickly than he wanted. He had no choice and knew it. His shoulder had gone stiff, and there was a painful burning along his scraped chest and stomach. Favoring his shoulder, Dasein eased himself down off the storage pile.

The ramp door was unlocked as



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Willa had promised. He let himself out into a darkened side yard, hesitated. The stars overhead looked cold and close. It *was* cold. He felt goose pimples along his arms. There was no sign of a guard out here, but he glimpsed lights and motion far up on the hillside.

Lock the ramp door, she'd said.

Dasein locked the door, darted across the yard. It was a narrow gate in the chain fence. The hinges creaked and he thought the latch unnaturally loud. There was a hasp and padlock. He closed the lock.

A narrow path led along the fence to the road. There was the Inn across the way—dark, but inviting. A dim yellow light glowed through the double doors. Using the light as a beacon, Dasein limped down the path and across to the Inn.

The lobby was empty, most of its lights turned off. There was the sound of snoring from the switchboard room behind the desk.

Dasein slipped quietly across the lobby, up the stairs and down the hall to his room.

The key—had he turned it in or left it in the truck? No . . . here it was in his pocket. He opened the door softly, stepped into the darkness of his room. He'd spent only one night in this room but it suddenly was a haven.

The truck? It was still up there on the road to Porterville. The

hell with it. He'd hire a ride up tomorrow and drive i down.

That Willa Bordeaux! Why had she done this?

Dasein began slipping out of his clothes. He wanted nothing more than a hot shower and bed. It was slow work undressing in the dark, but he knew a light might tell someone what time he'd returned.

What difference does that make? he asked himself. His clothing, torn, smeared with dirt, still stinking of the cave, was evidence enough of where he'd been and what he'd done.

Abruptly, he felt he no longer could sneak around.

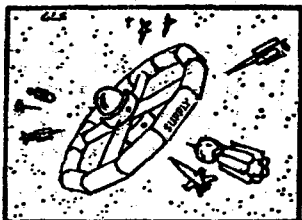
Directly ahead of him on the bedstand was a bottle of beer with a note attached to it. Dasein lifted the note, read it: "This isn't much, but it's all I could get. You'll need it in the morning. I'll call Jenny and tell her you're all right.

—Willa."

Dasein picked up the bottle, looked at the label. There was a blue stamp on it: "Exposed January 1959."

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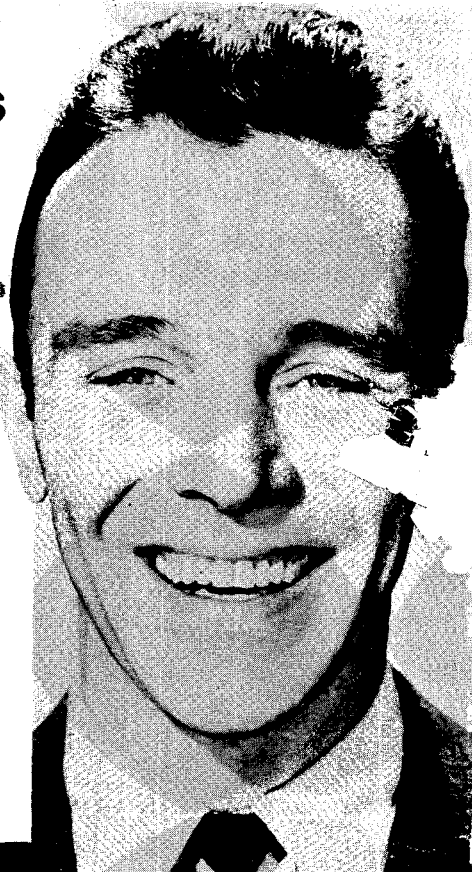
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